

BLACKBUT COMELY.

BY

G. J. WHYTE MELVILLE.





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BLACK BUT COMELY

OR,

THE ADVENTURES OF JANE LEE.

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BLACK BUT COMELY ;

OR,

THE ADVENTURES OF JANE LEE.

Book II.—*Continued.*

CHAPTER XXI.

SWANSDOWN RACES.

“CARD of the running horses names, weights, and colours of the riders! card of the running horses, &c.!” The oft-repeated cry ran glibly off Jericho’s lips, with a facility born of practice.

Partly from good looks, partly from good manners, he sold all his cards, and made a fair margin of profit, hours before the first race-horse appeared on the ground, attended

by its escort of idlers, admiring sheet, hood, and quarter-piece—for of the animal itself nothing could be seen but four long legs, not of the soundest, and a long swinging tail. An elderly, shrivelled man, chewing a straw, walked by the side of this well-concealed celebrity, which was led by a stunted urchin, who could not, it is to be hoped, be such a scoundrel as he looked.

But although some time must elapse before the saddling-bell should ring for the first event of the day, a deal of business had already been got through by those who catered for the amusement of the pleasure-seekers. A merry-go-round, bearing the appropriate name of Wheeler's Royal Circus, was in full swing, its rotatory chargers, black, red, spotted, and gray, mounted by children in every stage of stickiness, the result of a thriving trade driven in a neighbouring booth, whence could be heard at intervals the mild

crack of a pea-rifle, pointed by some rustic marksman, grinning and rosy-cheeked, whose rare success was rewarded in hardbake, elecampane, or nuts.

Next to this popular resort and emporium of indigestion, but dominating and diminishing its importance, by superior height and pretension, stood Bellingham's Grand Menagerie, hoisting the flags of many nations, including our own royal ensign, as purporting to have visited the whole habitable earth, but to hail last from Windsor, Balmoral, or other residence of Her Majesty the Queen. Portrayed on the outside, this collection of animals seemed interesting to a student of natural history, affording specimens of beasts and birds hitherto unknown in such gigantic proportions, so that it was difficult to imagine how the royal elephant, royal lion, and royal tiger, all of colossal dimensions, could be stowed away within

the limits of the canvas supposed to contain them. A brass band, consisting of two musicians, one of whom ingeniously performed on a gong with his feet, materially enhanced the impression of terror it seemed desirable to convey, and more than one future hero, lately breeched, having paid for entrance with considerable misgiving, retreated in a panic, forfeiting his penny rather than pass the awful curtain that shrouded these terrors of the wilderness from an every-day world.

Not so with the Giant, the Fat Lady, and the Two-headed Child. Here curiosity might gaze its fill unchecked by fear, for the first distinguished personage was deaf, the second affable, and the third so fast asleep in bed, that only one head could be seen above the blankets, and the second must be left to the imagination of a spectator.

I fancy this show afforded little satisfaction, yet those who came out advised their

friends to go in. People do not care to be singular in their indiscretions, therefore, perhaps, it is that — “One fool makes many.”

Besides these sights, to which there was no free admission, many amusements were provided that might be enjoyed for nothing. Posture-masters, in motley and spangles, twisted their limbs in every conceivable contortion, as if they were made of gutta-percha. Lying supine, these athletes kicked their progeny recklessly in air to catch them again in a sitting position on the soles of their feet, or, bending their own bodies backward as if the vertebral column had been taken out, picked up needles with their eyelids from underneath their heels, resuming the natural attitude of the human body with a startling somersault, no less surprising than the intricate feat of which it seemed an inevitable result.

Here, too, might be observed an exceedingly dirty man in a close-fitting jersey, bound hand and foot so effectually that the cords seemed to cut into his flesh, while he implored the bystanders to draw his knots yet tighter, that he might show how easily he would extricate himself when another shilling—only one more shilling in coppers—had been subscribed. Probably the added money was not forthcoming, as he never seemed to effect his own release; nor, indeed, under any circumstances could he vie in popularity with his neighbour, a puffy person, also in close-fitting garments, who professed to be champion boxer of England, open to compete with all the world, and hitherto unvanquished by mortal arm. Not so improbable a boast, inasmuch as his comprehensive challenge did not appear to have been taken up! This worthy, it would seem, was a friend of the Patron, having been

knocked out of time indeed some years ago in a drunken brawl by the old gipsy, with an energy the champion could not forget. Much liquor had subsequently drowned all unkindness between them, but they seldom met without fomenting their reconciliation in another cup.

The great boxer, catching sight of Jack Lee, let his chest contract, his shoulders fall, and his muscular system relax itself, while he desisted from his pompous march round a circle of some five feet in diameter, where he had been strutting to show himself, like a cock-grouse "drumming" in the glows of sunset on a Highland hill.

"Old pal," said the hero, in a husky voice, that yet impressed the listeners with a nameless awe, "I've been a-looking out for you the whole of this here blessed morning—blessed if I haint! Bless your old eyes! Come on and have a blessed drain."

No gipsy could be proof against such a storm of benedictions, and Fighting Jack consented willingly enough, but demanded courteously whether the other wouldn't put "the muffles" on and "play light" for a quiet five minutes, to please the yokels before they went to refresh?

"Muffles be blessed!" said the other, with a grunt that seemed to scorn such make-believe, but he muttered below his breath: "Not if I know it, my lad. Bless me, that light play of yourn is like the kicks of a horse!"

So the two disappeared in a drinking-booth, and Jane Lee congratulated herself that for the present she was released from the Patron's supervision, and need be accountable to Jericho alone. This guardian, however, stuck by her like a leech. They had scarcely been on the course an hour ere his companion's beauty excited such general

remark, not only from boors, reeling about in their smock-frocks, dazed with cider, but farmers and gentlefolks on horseback, or in carriages, that even the ladies asked their admirers: "Have you seen the handsome gipsy?" professing with womanly generosity the highest approval of her swarthy charms, yet tolerant of contradiction, and in no degree irritated by a difference of opinion in their particular friends.

More than once did Jericho's slender fingers steal to the knife he carried in his waistband, while the leer of a drunkard, or, more offensive still, the presuming stare of some bucolic coxcomb, was directed at his beautiful charge. Poor Jericho! he had never enjoyed Swansdown Races so little, nor been so pleased to hear the bell ring, directing the course to be cleared for the Swansdown Hunt Handicap—an event that would afford him some brief respite from his

torture, by riveting attention on the great business of the day.

The two gipsies had stationed themselves opposite the weighing enclosure, which was immediately under a wooden stand—entrance five shillings—occupied by the exclusive and aristocratic element of the gathering. Jane Lee stood staring listlessly at certain gaudy hats and light-coloured robes in one of its compartments, thinking how much better she would herself be dressed when her time came, and had even brought her mind to bear on the fashion of an attractive toilet for Epsom and Ascot, when Jericho, restlessly on the watch, saw her start, redden suddenly to the roots of her black hair, and turn white in the next breath. Following the direction of her eye, he only noticed a clumsy jockey, in blue jacket, with a yellow cap, carrying saddle and bridle out of the weighing-tent, and decided he must seek else-

where for the cause of his companion's agitation.

“You are ill, sister,” he whispered; “come away out of the crush. You look as if you were going to faint.” She recovered herself while he spoke, and protested with truth “she had never fainted in her life, that he was always fancying things, and she wished he would let her alone!”

Meanwhile the yellow-capped jockey, in a prodigious heat and fuss, busied himself with the adjustment of sundry rings, reins, and other contrivances for the guidance of a wicked little chestnut, preparatory to a hoist on its back from a grave man in gaiters, administered with such good-will as nearly to cant him over on the other side; after which ceremonies, man and horse were led carefully out, and left to their own devices in the middle of the course.

It needed no preliminary canter, not even

a second glance, to satisfy Jane Lee of their identity. The pair before her could not be mistaken. They were none other than "Forward James" and Potboy! That Paravant had not recognised her she felt sure, and no wonder! He was as yet too fresh at the game to spare attention from his own unparalleled boots and breeches, the length, or rather shortness, of his stirrups, and the nervous agitation experienced by every novice when he rides his first race. Potboy, too, like many half-bred horses, was a disagreeable mount; in training eager, fractious, and inclined to pull unpleasantly hard. It took the rider all his time to bounce and sidle in safety to the start, nor did the little horse become quite amenable till within two hundred yards of home, when he tired and faded ignominiously to the easy canter of an old gentleman's cob.

Though Paravant, *nolens volens*, made all the running, the pace was by no means good.

Before the race was over, and he had flourished in last but one, Jane Lee, with characteristic recklessness, jumped at one of those prompt decisions to which she owed the many chances and changes of her eventful life. It was her maxim that nothing when accomplished was half so preposterous as it seemed while in course of preparation, and that you never knew what you could do till you tried.

She resolved to obtain an interview with James Paravant then and there. Fighting Jack, as luck would have it, was safely disposed of with his boon companion. If she could get quit of Jericho, she might test the memory and affection of her old admirer while telling his fortune in her gipsy character, confident that till she thought well to disclose herself he would not find her out.

“Jerry,” said she, “I’m going to try my hand at dukkering now. Don’t you think we had better separate? If people see us

together they'll suspect you are prompting me, and it isn't all on the square."

"Right you are, sister," answered Jerry, who often boasted he was "as deep as a well, and always kept something up his sleeve;" meaning that he was capable of over-trumping an adversary at a game of duplicity, and liked nothing better than such encounters—cheat against cheat, and the biggest liar take all.

"Where shall we meet again, Jerry?"

"Where you please, sister. Here, if you like, in two hours' time. You'll have made a matter of ten quid by that, if I know anything of the trade."

"Will you give me five for my earnings?"

But Jericho shook his head, and slipped away through the crowd, with a keener expression than common in his brown handsome face.

Jane Lee, taking advantage of the liberty

thus accorded, crossed into the race-course, and began to hunt about amongst its motley occupants for the jockey in blue and yellow cap. Her search was the more ineffectual that those unsuccessful colours had long ago been covered by an overcoat and a white hat, although a pair of thin boots and wiry spurs, with a straight whip sticking from his pocket, still betrayed the identity of one of those gentlemen-riders who provided sport (and amusement) for the meeting. It was provoking she could not come across him, and she showed her vexation in her gait. The hurried step, the impatient gestures, were watched with some interest by a spare old man, bent nearly double, in a brown great-coat, shabby hat, and large horn spectacles, who seemed, though at a respectful distance, to be strangely fascinated by the handsome gipsy.

She never noticed him; her mind was

otherwise engaged. At length it occurred to her that if she halted here in the middle of the course her fine singing might excite attention, and, attracting those within hearing, bring to her side the person she desired to meet.

Nor had she miscalculated her powers. Booths, shows, tumblers, and merry-go-rounds were forsaken by a motley crowd, that pushed and peered and widened and wavered round one common centre, while the handsome woman with the dark eyes carolled out the following gipsy ballad in her full sweet voice :

“Kind gentleman, there astride on your mare,
That wants your fortune told,
Come bow your ear to the gipsy, my dear ;
But cross her palm with gold.
And all in a look, like print on a book,
She’ll read your luck to-day,
And tell you the star of the lady afar,
Who has stolen your heart away !”

“It’s my belief you’re a gipsy thief !
And stealing is all you can,
From shelf and store, from platter and floor,
From child, and woman, and man.
The babe in bed, the lamb in shed,
The hen that cackles to lay,
And coin from vest, and heart from breast,
You steal them all away !”

She looked askance, with her merry glance,
And he bent in the saddle there,
To meet the eyes that carried the prize
From all the folk in the fair.
“My beauty !” quoth he, “ride home with me ;
Deny me not, I pray ;
For it’s come to pass, that a gipsy lass
Has stolen my heart away !”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BAIT.

“WHAT a lovely voice !” exclaimed the ladies. “What a handsome girl !” added the gentlemen. “This be a loikely wench, sure-ly !” pronounced the rustics, while Jane Lee’s audience, after the fashion of open-air critics when paying-time is at hand, melted discreetly away.

Amongst the few who remained, brother professionals, tramps, and the poorest of the agriculturists, from whom contributions could not reasonably be expected, were two individuals apparently belonging to a more prosperous class. One of these was the infirm old man in spectacles, the other, that gentle-

man-rider in an overcoat, whose yellow cap had showed in front during a great part of the race, with such unfortunate results at the run-in.

“Forward James,” in spite of his failure, was yet thoroughly satisfied with himself, an agreeable state of mind rendering people affable, tolerant, and in charity with all men. If not to his valet, or his trainer, or the stable in general, our gentleman-jockey was a hero to himself, and felt almost as well pleased with his new silk jacket as if it had passed the judge’s chair a length in front. The ambition of his life was gratified. He had entered the lists at last, and would hereafter be considered a sporting character by the little world of yeomen, horse-dealers, and stable-boys, wherein he was desirous to shine.

Since Miss Lee’s departure from the rectory—a crushing blow, of which the effects punished him even now—young Paravant

had grown restless, discontented, uncomfortable, and more inclined than ever towards those distractions which his station enabled him to obtain. Had it not been for the Swansdown Hunt Handicap, he told himself, with the excitement of training Potboy, and riding that game little horse much too frequent gallops, he must have broken his heart.

Being somewhat weak-minded at best, it made less difference to Paravant than to a wiser man that he should have fallen in love. His former occupations still afforded relief, though, like an opium-eater or a dram-drinker, he required the stimulant stronger day by day. When farming grew uninteresting he flew to cricket, and that noble game failing to rouse him, had recourse to racing, a pastime that need never pall, so long as "the shouting of the captains" shall deafen a British public in that hungry insti-

tution called the Ring, which flourishes and fattens upon fools.

Paravant was totally without experience, a want that seemed strangely supplemented by unusual luck. Some people think the devil is at the bottom of such crafty arrangements for encouragement of a beginner. Be this as it may, our friend landed more than a hundred pounds in his first attempt at that most hazardous of all guesses, the comparative speed of two inferior race-horses; and having only ventured a modest "tenner" on his success in the Hunt Handicap, was still in funds, willing to embark in any kind of adventure that promised excitement, even though requiring ready money in exchange. Moreover, he had not forgotten a certain interview in the rectory garden, when that young lady, whose proud eyes still haunted him, seemed to scorn his quiet uneventful life, urging him to put out into the stream

and take his chance. Well, he was launched now, to some purpose! He had followed her directions implicitly, and for *her* sake too, though she would never know it. Such thoughts, indulged in at sunset, or by moonlight, brought the tears very near his eyes, and, for a few thrilling moments, he would feel, through all his dull grosser nature, a faint reflection of the martyr's loyal flame.

In the meantime, this gipsy seemed to have a splendid voice, and, as far as he could see—for the crush of people prevented his near approach—a handsome face. Though unable to quote that poet, he agreed with Moore that—

It's a shame, when flowers around us rise,

To make light of the rest, if the rose be not there;
And the world is so rich in voluptuous eyes,

'Twere a pity to limit one's love to a pair.

So he strolled carelessly towards the singer,

unbuttoning his overcoat, that she might observe the silk jacket underneath.

Trusting to a disguise she had taken infinite pains to prepare, but had not suffered, we may be sure, to dim by one single shade her picturesque beauty, Jane Lee met her former lover without the quiver of an eyelash. He looked paler, she thought, than when they parted; fretting, indeed, and the unromantic effects of Epsom salts, combined with strong exercise, had reduced his weight, as was only fair to Potboy, by the best part of a stone.

What made him start? She began simply enough, in the regular form: "Have your fortune told, pretty gentleman! Cross the poor gipsy's hand with silver, there's a good gentleman, and she'll tell you your fortune."

Her voice was feigned, and she took care he should see no more of her face than cheek and chin, under her gipsy hat, yet he stood

pondering a moment, as if his thoughts were far away. Then pulling his right hand from his pocket, offered it freely for inspection, rings and all.

Bending over the broad muscular palm, she counterfeited the whine of her people with admirable skill.

“The gipsy could see clearer if ’twas crossed with a bit of silver. Put a bright shilling in your hand, dear gentleman. To give the poor gipsy light. What’s a shilling to the like of you?”

He was himself again now, and complied, after a coarse compliment, that amused her exceedingly.

“You’re a lucky gentleman,” she resumed, affecting to study the lines on his hand with close attention. “And so you deserves to be. Lucky when you stays at home, lucky when you walks abroad, lucky when you gets up on horseback, lucky when you sits

down to cards, and—no. What's this! Unlucky—bitter unlucky—when you're a-looking for the girl you love!"

He laughed uneasily, but turned pale, and though he muttered, "D——d nonsense!" did not attempt to withdraw his hand.

"It's your star!" she continued. "There's a cloud over it now, but keep a good heart, kind gentleman, it will shine out bright hereafter. *Her* star is the same as yours, so you're bound to come together. And yet she is crying her dark eyes out this moment for your sake. Ah! she's humble enough to-day, for all her pale proud face, that looks as if it couldn't give a tear to any mortal thing. Cross the poor gipsy's hand with another bit of silver, only a little sixpence, kind gentleman, and perhaps I'll tell you more."

Much disturbed, and not entirely free

from misgivings that he was tampering with the Evil One, he thrust on her a handful of silver, and bade her in a husky voice : “ Finish with what she had to say. He couldn’t stand listening to this rubbish all the afternoon.”

Bending lower, till the rim of her broad hat touched his wrist, she sank her voice to a whisper that reached no ear but his own.

“ The gipsy knows more than you think for, pretty gentleman. She reads the stars, ay, many a time, when you’re asleep on your pillow, dreaming of the dark-eyed lass. The stars never tell lies, nor the gipsy neither. They taught me where your spirit was wandering last night—miles and miles away, in a garden of roses, by the side of a tall pale girl, with red flowers at her breast and an open book in her hand——”

“ The devil ! ” he exclaimed, staggered naturally enough by this faithful description.

“ On a new-mown lawn, under an old

elm-tree," proceeded the sorceress, whose voice was shaking, he believed, under the influence of her familiar spirit. "There was a gentleman waiting outside the garden, a gentleman with a sharp clean-shaved face and a black coat down to his heels. Ah! the stars teach strange things, and tell of strange people. Yes; *he* was Strange too!"

"Forward James" had good average nerves, but he trembled like a leaf. She seemed to know the very name of his rival. This was the black art with a vengeance! He thought whether he hadn't better offer her a sovereign, and make his escape.

"Don't you be afraid of the poor gipsy," said she, laughing outright; "if she's wiser than you it's for good, not evil. She wouldn't do you harm. Perhaps she can tell you the name of your dark-eyed lass; perhaps it begins with the same letter as luck, and lady, and love!"

He seized her wrist with the grasp of a man thoroughly in earnest.

“If you can tell me where Jane Lee is hidden I’ll give you a hundred pounds down. On my honour as a gentleman! In Bank of England notes. I’ve never had a moment’s peace since she went away!”

While he spoke the bell rang to clear the course, and an ebbing wave of humanity, sweeping them to the ropes, brought with it the formidable presence of the Patron, by no means sober, linked arm-in-arm with the old gentleman in a long greatcoat, who had never been very far off. Her quick perception took alarm at once.

“You must go now,” she whispered, still concealing her face. “Our people are always on the watch. We mustn’t be seen together. You don’t know the gipsies; how jealous they are, and handy with their knives. If you weren’t a young handsome gentleman it

wouldn't matter. Listen. Do you want to hear more of Jane Lee? Come to Brimscombe Brake, yonder, at the back of the course, after the next race. Bring your horse. All depends on the stars. I wouldn't say but the dark-eyed lady might be there herself!"

Then she vanished in the crowd, while James Paravant, wondering whether he was awake or dreaming, hastened to an out-building, where his horse had been stabled, to make sure that Potboy was still among the realities of life.

His late companion joined the Patron with a frankness of manner that disarmed suspicion, if indeed he entertained any. She did not fail to remark that the old gentleman who accompanied him disappeared at her approach. She wondered too at the prolonged absence of Jericho, but gave his doings the less attention that her own thoughts were engrossed elsewhere. If she could get out of the Patron's observa-

tion for the next half-hour she saw her way to freedom—more, to ease, affluence, and a recognised position in society, could she but play her bold game as boldly as she desired.

At this crisis fortune favoured her more than she had any right to expect, through the pugnacious instincts of Fighting Jack, now more than half drunk.

As they pushed about in the crowd—that old pugilist forcing his way with offensive assumption—they came across a pea-and-thimble man, whose table was about to be wrecked by certain indignant victims of his too-open deceptions. The knave, catching at any excuse to withdraw attention from his roguery, accused Jack of upsetting the board, and thus preventing the payment of two golden sovereigns to a quick-sighted countryman who had discovered the elusive pea.

That successful player—a tall broad-shouldered fellow—irritated by previous

failures, bore with some impatience Jack's overbearing demeanour, and proposed, as the gipsy had created all this confusion, he should make good the loss.

At so impossible a suggestion Jack snapped his fingers in the speaker's face, whereat the crowd, exulting in a prospect of gratuitous excitement, crowded round, shouting for "a ring," and inciting the adversaries to "set to, and have it out like men."

The countryman seemed nothing loath. "Oh! you're one of *that* sort, are you?" said he, squaring up to the gipsy, and aiming at him a blow that would have stunned an ox, neatly stopped by the veteran, who returned like lightning, sending his huge adversary heavily to the ground.

Youth, size, and herculean strength, however, are awkward foes to deal with, for the most accomplished fighter at three-score years of age, and in his second round, the boxer,

whose condition was none of the best, called into play all his former science to keep out of distance while he recovered breath.

“At him, Jack,” urged the excited spectators.

“Ah! that’s all very well,” replied the old athlete, with grim humour; “I can tell you he’s no such catch!”

Meantime, Jane Lee stood rooted to the spot in a paroxysm of fear. Skill, temper, cool courage, and a frame that seemed built expressly for such contests, conquered at last in spite of age, and though the countryman came up time after time bruised, blinded, but full of pluck, he was so obviously worsted that, forgetting the rules of fair play, his friends made in with a rush to his assistance. The bystanders took opposite sides, the crowd increased, and the row became general.

Soon a dozen stalwart policemen were seen moving steadily through the tumult. Women

screamed, men swore, staves were drawn, heads broken. Fighting Jack, after a desperate resistance, was taken into custody, and Jane Lee, watching her opportunity, scoured off like a lapwing for Brimscombe Brake.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE HOOK.

It was less than a quarter of a mile from the stand, and by keeping behind certain booths and temporary erections that dotted the race-course, could be reached almost unobserved; but her breath came quick, and the handsome girl in gipsy dress looked, as indeed she felt, sorely exercised, both in body and mind, when she reached her goal.

A gentleman-jockey, leading his horse, was there first. Something told him, twenty paces off, before he could peep under her hat, that the woman he loved was coming to him at last. His arms opened instinctively, as she flung herself on his breast, panting,

trembling, and, for once, frightened out of her wits.

“ You didn’t know me ! You didn’t know me ! ” she sobbed, between laughing and crying. “ Oh Mr. Paravant, I never thought you would have forgotten *me* ! ”

She was so exhausted with her run, so nervous and agitated, that she must have fallen had he not passed his arm round her waist and pressed her to his heart. Such situations inspire confidence, and “ Forward James,” whose bashfulness seemed to have left him, felt wholly equal to the occasion.

“ How could I hope to see you again ? ” said he, smoothing her dishevelled locks with gentle and respectful touch. “ At such a place, too, and in such a queer get-up ! What does it all mean ? Miss Lee, you *must* let me take you away from here. ”

“ I told you never to say Miss Lee, ” she answered, with something of the old

imperious playfulness that moved him to the core. "What a bad memory you have. Never mind, you were a good boy to do the gipsy's bidding. You may call me Jane now."

"And always?"

"And always, if you want to. Oh, take care! There's sure to be somebody looking!"

Their lips met. For one brief moment James Paravant felt his pulses tingle with the sense of rapture that comes not to men twice in a lifetime. They seem to like it and long for its repetition, looking about in many strange corners to find it again; but there are flowers, and those the sweetest, that yield all their fragrance at a first exhalation, and colours so exquisite that they must fade to coarser and commoner tints even as they touch their brightest and their best. Nothing is without a drawback. Potboy's rein, tugging at his master's elbow, diminished, in some

measure, the fulness of delight afforded by this first embrace. The horse, not being in love, wanted to nibble the fresh green leaves, so acceptable after six weeks in training on short allowance of water, with unlimited corn and beans.

“I wish I hadn’t brought him,” said Paravant. “But you told me. At least I didn’t know it was *you*. Shall I turn him loose? He’s very much in the way!”

“Turn him loose! Gracious heavens! What are you thinking of? Don’t you know why I wanted you to meet me here?”

Dim recollections of Young Lochinvar floated across his mind. With some misgiving he looked at Potboy’s saddle, weighing seven pounds, and barely roomy enough for his own manly proportions.

She saw and appreciated the difficulty. “I can ride,” said she. “I learnt one Christmas holidays at Brighton, Mr. Paravant—

well, James—there's not a moment to lose. They must have missed me already, and will hunt every inch of the race-course till I'm found. They've seen me come to meet you here. Don't shake your head. I'm not joking. It's murder—*murder*, I tell you, if they ever get me back !”

She was really frightened, though perhaps less so than she seemed ; but her pale face and dilated eyes roused all the chivalry of his nature, and he was ready to face the whole Romany nation rather than give her up.

“There would be a fight for it before we came to that,” he answered, setting his teeth. “Never mind. Potboy can gallop a bit, though we couldn't win to-day. Do you think you might manage to sit him if I held you on ? He won't kick, I know.”

“Yes ! yes ! I'll do anything. I'll put my arms round your neck. Only be quick !”

It's life or death! I'd rather be dashed to pieces than fall into their hands again. Save me! Save me! Here they come!"

Swift and lithe as a serpent, out of the very heather on which they stood, darted the slender form of Jericho, leaving a brown greatcoat and a pair of horn spectacles to mark his lair. The gipsy's dark eyes blazed, froth stood on his lip; but he tried to command his voice while he seized Jane Lee by the wrist, bidding her in a hoarse whisper: "Come back this moment to our people in their tents!"

But Paravant interposed his sturdy person, with riding-whip raised, and one hand on the other's collar.

"Stand off, you hound!" he vociferated. "How dare you touch that lady with your dirty fingers! Back, or I'll flog the life out of you with my whip!"

The gipsy's mouth shut like a clasp, and

the white teeth grinned dangerously, while the blade of a long knife flashed in the light, as he brandished it overhead. It was well for James Paravant that he had been reared in a county where the manly art of wrestling is practised even amongst boys at school. His proficiency in this exercise, acknowledged by the low-lived companions with whom he often contended, now stood him in good stead. While Jane Lee, with admirable presence of mind, snatched the bridle from his arm, holding on gallantly to the startled Potboy, and frustrating the horse's efforts at escape, our West-countryman caught his antagonist's wrist with a skilful turn that jerked the knife ten feet in air, then, closing instantly, lifted the gipsy off his feet, and sent him flying over the wrestler's own head, to measure his length, stunned and motionless, on the ground.

One moment he looked at his prostrate foe, who neither spoke nor stirred. "It's a

beautiful back-fall!" he murmured, "I wish I mayn't have broken his neck!" the next he was in the saddle, showing Jane Lee how to get up by resting her foot on his instep, and so at one nimble spring seating herself on the horse's withers in front of him.

Potboy plunged, the fallen gipsy never moved a finger, and a distant roar from Bellingham's grand menagerie announced the approach of feeding time, advertised for six o'clock.

Jane Lee lost her balance more than once, but the horse had long free shoulders, behind a muscular neck, and she felt no diffidence in twining her arms round Paravant, as she promised. In a few strides the chestnut seemed reconciled to his double burden, consenting to thread Brimscombe Brake and a gap that afforded egress to the road, at a walk; so that by the time Jericho Lee could rise to a sitting posture, sore all over, with a conviction

that the heather beneath him rocked like the deck of a ship, our Young Lochinvar had left Swansdown race-course a league or more behind, and began to wonder what he had better do next.

It was delightful, no doubt, to feel his companion's arms about him, while his breath stirred the soft hair in her neck, but this couldn't go on for ever—not even all night. Potboy was entitled to repose, the lady would require tea, and though, for himself, he was too much in love to care about supper, he felt he should very much like something to drink.

“The horse is quieter than I expected,” said she, recovering breath after a gallop of some miles, as the pace calmed down to a walk. “It's a pleasant ride, but where we're going I don't know!”

“And I don't care!” replied her cavalier, “so long as we go together.”

“And don’t go back,” she added. “Do you know, James Paravant, that your courage to-day has saved my life?”

“I always told you I’d plenty of pluck. I don’t think you believed it. How you used to bully me! You’ll never bully me again?”

“I haven’t the right,” she whispered gently, yielding, as if she could not help it, to the pressure of his supporting arm.

Even Paravant’s inexperience could hardly misinterpret such a hint, so offered. When two people are riding on one horse, moreover, the juxtaposition cannot but impart confidence, and I imagine the use of the pillion by our progenitors afforded facilities for love-making, of which it is a sad pity their descendants should be deprived.

“I mean fair, indeed I do!” he blundered, clumsily enough. “But we can’t stay out all night. Will you trust yourself to *me*?”

“I must,” she whispered. “I *will*. I’ll do everything you tell me, as if—as if—I belonged to you altogether.”

“I will house you in safety to-night,” he murmured, “and to-morrow——”

She did not quite catch the rest, drowned in the beat of Potboy’s hoofs; for Paravant, perhaps because he could not find words to express his rapture, put the horse into a gallop once more.

It was nearly dark. Stars were already twinkling in the dusky purple overhead. Beneath, a few scattered lights and a bright red spot, marking the head of its harbour, denoted their approach to a seaport town, thriving in sedate commercial prosperity, inhabited by a mercantile population, who devoted their whole lives to trade.

It was perhaps the place of all others in which the arrival of such a trio—a sporting-looking man behind a handsome gipsy

wench, on a well-bred horse, with its mane plaited—would excite least remark, and Paravant deserved some credit for his selection of such a refuge; but his subsequent proceedings, crafty and well-arranged, originated, I am inclined to think, in the counsels of his companion.

Half a mile from the town they were fortunate enough to overtake an empty fly, lumbering heavily home, and engaged it at once. In this conveyance Jane Lee, screened from observation, followed Potboy and his rider to a livery stable, with which both seemed well acquainted. Here the former was housed, and the latter got into the fly. This strangely-dressed couple were then set down at a milliner's shop, where Paravant could not but admire the readiness with which his companion extricated herself from a false position at the expense of truth. Coolly walking to the counter, she informed a young

person there presiding that her carriage had been upset and her horses lamed while returning from an afternoon party at Mrs. Brownrigg's in fancy-dress. Probably they had heard of Mrs. Brownrigg. No? Well, the Park was at some distance. This gentleman fortunately arrived in time to escort her here, for the servants were obliged to stay with the carriage. She wasn't frightened—not a bit—nor hurt; but she had missed her train, and by no possibility could get home to-night. She must sleep in the town, but she couldn't go to an hotel in this masquerading costume, and she wanted some clothes—ready-made, of course—a gown and a decent hat, and a few odds and ends, you know, just for one night.

So plausible a tale impressed and interested the dressmaker. In less than half an hour, to Paravant's exceeding admiration, his gipsy companion reappeared from a parlour

behind the shop, in her original character as Jane Lee.

“But you nearly spoilt it all,” she whispered, when they re-entered the fly; “you shouldn’t have shown all that money and told me to get a complete fit-out. If she had heard you it would have contradicted my story. You mustn’t be so headstrong. Here we are.”

Arrived at the archway of The Bull and Bootjack she placed herself in the landlady’s charge at once, ordering a cup of tea, and retiring immediately to her bedroom, on the plea of fatigue after a journey in which she had lost her luggage. Paravant lingered in the passage to wish her good-night, and felt a little disappointed to be put off with only a hand-shake.

“Mayn’t I say you’re my wife?” he demanded, getting as much warmth as he could into this commonplace ceremony; “that old catamaran will be sure to ask.”

“Certainly not,” she answered. “Sister if you like. That ought to satisfy anybody.”

“My wife to-morrow, then?” he pleaded.

“I can’t promise. I have not known you very long. I’m not sure I like you well enough. Yet——” and the cruel door was shut in his face.

But the last monosyllable was as a lump of sugar after a bitter draught, and Paravant descended the stairs to obtain the refreshment of which he stood so much in need, as happy as a king.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LANDING-NET.

WHATEVER doubts and uncertainties may have haunted the gentleman's pillow, for with all its fascinations he could not but acknowledge he had embarked on a strange adventure, the lady's mind was made up from the moment she discovered in her assumed character of a fortune-teller that he had never thrown off his allegiance to lost Jane Lee. Entertained for her own sake, there seemed something touching in a stupid unreasoning fidelity, that she would have ridiculed if cherished for another; and while she could hardly think of one particular in which she would not have liked him to be

different, she yet came to the conclusion that there were many young gentlemen, in and out of society, who might make worse husbands than "Forward James."

As she lay in her roomy four-post bed, so enjoyable after Fighting Jack's scanty resting-place in the caravan, she reviewed her position coolly enough, congratulating herself on the good-luck that offered, and the courage that seized, so unlooked-for a chance of escape. She felt she had been a captive and was comparatively free, at least she would be far more at liberty as Paravant's wife than as Jack Lee's daughter. Mrs. James Paravant! She repeated it in every variety of intonation, without finding one that satisfied her. Perhaps by pronouncing the name like French, something might be made of it—this should be for future consideration. In the meantime, there was no question, it must immediately become

her own. Then she thought of Mervyn Strange, his grave face, his deep sad eyes, and the five hundred pounds of which she had shamelessly robbed him. Yes, that was another reason. In a few weeks she would claim her own money, and repay him without its costing her husband a shilling. Husband! She hated the very word, but there was nothing else for it now!

With a woman's quick perception of the weak point in her natural prey, she felt no misgiving whatever lest Paravant should also show disinclination to life-long bondage, and take advantage of their unusual situation to avoid so irrevocable a step as legitimate wedlock. Something told her he was fast hooked, and that any attempt at a struggle could be instantly checked by the slightest symptom of disinclination on her own part. Yes, the way seemed plain enough, requiring but a little tact, a little self-command, and the

unflinching exercise of a strong unscrupulous will.

So she remained shut up in her own room the whole morning. He sent several messages by the chambermaid, to tell the lady—he could not bring himself to call her his sister—that he was waiting breakfast, and even pervaded the passage so persistently as to observe tea, toast, pens, ink, and paper, taken into the sacred chamber. Sitting down at last, disconsolately enough, to his own lukewarm repast, the waiter brought in a note that robbed him indeed of appetite, but repaid him for his disappointment a hundred-fold.

“DEAR FRIEND”—it began—

“For I suppose I must only call you friend—though your courage and generosity deserve a better title—you asked me a question last night that a woman cannot answer without

deep consideration, that, when she *does* answer, one way or the other, decides the whole destiny of her life. What am I to say? What ought I to say? What do I *wish* to say? I examine my own heart again and again, without coming to a satisfactory conclusion. We have known each other only a few weeks—but it is not that. My position here is wretchedly friendless, and entirely false—but it is not that. I have seen very few people, and never *quite cared* for anybody—yet—but it is certainly not that! Why then do I find it so difficult to make up my mind? Sometimes I feel proud and happy, sometimes perplexed and miserable. Can you explain this? I cannot. At whatever decision I arrive, and I think I can guess which way it will be, there is no doubt that you and I must not meet while we remain here. I put it to your own good feeling and sense of right. Supposing, only *supposing*, I

ever became your wife, you would like me to have acted as I am acting now. If you were to go away for two days—forty-eight hours, I don't think I could bear it longer—and return with all difficulties smoothed, and everything prepared, I should have time to get some things made, and could consider matters with a clearer head and a quieter heart than at present. I am tired and ill, no wonder, and flurried, and—yes, I will confess it—a little pleased and flattered at somebody's good opinion.

“Adieu then, or *au revoir*, at your own option; but believe me, in either case, I shall not forget you, and am,

“Always yours,

“J. L.”

The effect of such a letter on so inexperienced a suitor need hardly be described. There was just enough love in it to nourish

his hopes, enough uncertainty to rouse his fears, and a strain of half-melancholy coquetry, that excited his wishes to the utmost, while affecting to claim protection from his manhood and truth. "Forward James" was in London the same evening, and back again the next night, with a special licence in his pocket, a plain gold ring—medium size—in his purse, and a steadfast purpose to lead a new life as a respectable member of society in the character of a married man.

The young lady, too, was not idle in this brief interval. Her sex, so full of sweetness and sympathy, take an interest in matrimony, no less general than do sportsmen in the destruction of game. I am aware that, under the usual restrictions of decorum and the crush of business, always urged as an excuse, a bride's trousseau cannot be prepared under six weeks; but only apply a little unusual pressure, hint at an elopement,

a clandestine engagement, or a possibility that the marriage may not come off at all, needles fly like magic, the whole force of the establishment is put on, a score of hands work uninterruptedly for a score of hours, and lo! yards and yards are unrolled of triumphant millinery, light, exquisite, and filmy, as gossamers that dress the meadow on a May morning, and, indeed, little less calculated to last out the wear-and-tear of the day.

When Paravant saw Jane Lee again it was raining in torrents—it rains six days out of seven in this watery corner of the kingdom—but the girl's presence, in white muslin, above all, *without her bonnet*, brought sunshine to his heart. He wondered how he could have borne even two days' absence from this radiant vision; and, truth to tell, Jane Lee looked remarkably well in a dress that, from its snowy

sameness, unrelieved by any spot of colour—for a veil very properly hides their blushes—is a little trying to the majority of brides.

A proud man was “Forward James,” and a happy, while he followed all this loveliness into a dingy one-horse fly, feeling that, in an hour’s time, it would be his own, and for life!

The last consideration afforded him unalloyed satisfaction. That is indeed a cold and unimpressionable nature which can dwell at such a moment on the disappointments and drawbacks of a possible future—change, misunderstanding, inconstancy, incompatibility, perhaps only weariness, perhaps positive aversion and disgust.

No man worth his salt anticipates evils such as these; and even if they do come, he should remember that compensation is one of the conditions on which we hold life, and that it is something to have felt, if only

for an hour, elevated out of self by a pure and ennobling devotion to another.

“You must do without bridesmaids,” whispered Paravant, as they stopped at the church door in a pouring rain, “and the verger will have to give you away; but it’s all right. I’ve got it here, in black and white, from the Archbishop of Canterbury, you know; that’s good enough, I hope! Oh! it’s a regular lawful marriage, you may be sure!”

She smiled under her veil, wondering whether he really presumed to take credit for not trying to outwit *her!*

Notwithstanding the bridegroom’s forethought, however, matters seemed in no advanced state of preparation as this happy couple moved up the nave towards the altar. A damp and mouldy woman was lazily sweeping out a pew; the verger, with his mouth full, had hardly settled himself into a black robe, so fringed and tufted that the mind

somehow associated it with a funeral. The vestry door, standing open, denoted that no clergyman had yet arrived. Rain pattered on the roof, and dashed against a stained-glass window, admitting but little of the dull light afforded by a day more than half-drowned. Paravant began to feel depressed, and even Jane Lee could not help thinking how sadly all this fell short of the ideal wedding she and her school-fellows used to conjure up at Miss Quilter's, long ago.

Poor Miss Quilter! where was she now?—where were the Tregarthens?—where was everybody?—and what had become of Mervyn Strange?

The vestry door shut with a bang; there came a firm quick tread, a rustling of garments, a sonorous cough, that seemed familiar to the happy couple, preoccupied as they were.

“This way, if you please,” murmured the verger, in a low respectful tone, suggestive

of fees. The old pew-woman, who had never learned to read, put on her spectacles and produced a prayer-book; the bride arranged her veil; the bridegroom pulled down his shirt-cuffs, and both took their places as politely indicated by the verger, conscious that the coming ceremony was more formidable than they had supposed.

Pale as a ghost, tall and stately in his white surplice, bearing his head aloft and his shoulders squared, like a man who walks bravely to death, the clergyman approached the altar rails. It is no disparagement to the nerves of the pair about to kneel before him, that one started violently and the other with difficulty repressed a scream. At the same moment they recognised, in the priest who was to unite them for better and worse, none other than the former curate of Combe-Appleton—Mervyn Strange!

He had found time while perusing the

licence in his vestry to summon all his manhood, and prepare himself for the ordeal. Who shall measure its severity or gauge the depths of anguish in which his soul was sunk during those moments of torture? The man had plenty of pluck—perhaps he knew where to go and ask for more. But this is a sacred subject, on which it becomes us not to dwell.

Of the three hearts beating before that communion-table, the saddest was the steadiest and the most composed.

“Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?” His voice came calm and firm, he showed no more symptoms of emotion than the verger himself, who accepted that responsibility without scruple. He went through the service quietly and soberly to the end, nor winced at its noble promises marvellously expressed, its touching obligations solemnly enjoined; but he addressed

himself solely to the bridegroom, keeping his eyes averted from the bride's face.

More than once his heart rebelled at the chance that had thrust on him this painful task. He had not been here a month, having sought a curacy that offered abundance of hard self-denying work, when he resigned, as he felt incumbent on him, his engagement with Mr. Tregarthen. To-day, too, it was not his turn to take such duties as might offer—there seemed a fatality in his rector's absence, and the sudden indisposition of a brother-curate occurring, as it seemed, purposely, to stretch him on the rack at a moment's notice.

Fatality! No. It was part of his punishment. He must accept and bear it as best he might.

The worst was yet to come. Entering the vestry for certain necessary formalities, Paravant hung back to refresh two willing

palms with injudicious liberality, and for a minute Mervyn Strange was alone with Jane Lee!

Stay! Not Jane Lee. She was Mrs. Paravant now. This morning it seemed only misery, through which shone gleams of happiness, to recall her image, and lo! in ten minutes, to think of her had become mortal sin. How beautiful she looked in that white veil, with her glorious eyes and wreaths of bright black hair! Why was he to be punished like this?

She bent those glorious eyes on his own, and for the first time he forced himself to meet them.

“Can you forgive me?” she murmured.

“From my heart. I have blessed you as a priest. As a man, I pray humbly and heartily that you *may* be blessed!”

“And the money?” She blushed to her temples. “Indeed I mean to be honest and

pay every farthing. I ought never to have taken it."

He smiled kindly, yet with something of scorn.

"You have taken everything," he said, "and you are welcome! A man can but give his all. God bless you, and farewell!"

Book III.

CHAPTER XXV.

LAUNCHED.

“WHO the deuce is this chap with three grays and a chestnut? Not much of a coachman, I should say. Don't remember seeing him before.”

“I'm surprised. I should have thought *you* were sure to know him. That's the man with the handsome wife—the woman they call Beltenebrosa.”

“What a long word! Sounds like the name of a race-horse. Why do they call her that?”

“Because she’s as black as your hat—well, not yours, for it’s a white one, but mine—and as handsome as the Queen of Sheba.”

“Never saw the Queen of Sheba. There’s a picture of her in the Academy, that looks like a mulatto in drink. Is that what’s-her-name on the box? By Jove, she is a good-looking one!”

“I told you so. Wait till you’ve seen her in a room. I am not easily bowled over. I wish I were! but she staggered *me*.”

“Why, where did you meet her? What a rum fellow you are! You find out people in the four corners of the earth.”

“This was in the fifth, called Hyde Park Corner, or very near it. I met her on Sunday, at Lisbon’s. He brings out a new beauty every year.”

“Was the husband there?”

“Of course. What do you take me for?”

“Has *he* got a name too? Hers ought to be enough for both.”

“His name is Paravant, but he’s an Englishman. Now, I believe she *is* a foreigner. At least she gives out she was born a Beltenebrosa. I’m not sure she don’t put it on her cards.”

“And what is the husband?”

“Rather a count, and rather a cub; but not half a bad fellow; hasn’t two ideas, and can ride like a bird.”

“You seem to be in with the lot.”

“Not I; but *she’s* so good-looking, one’s bound to be civil to *him*. It’s rather a tax. I sometimes think I like ugly women best. They’re so much less trouble!”

“All tastes are to be respected,” observed his friend, and the pair strolled off in different directions, to say the same things to the same

people, just as they did yesterday and will to-morrow, and so on, with but little variety till after Goodwood.

But one of these, the last speaker, had determined to become better acquainted with the dark face that roused his interest more than he chose to admit in conversation with his companion. Lord St. Moritz was a sincere admirer of beauty, surrendering, with touching helplessness, at the very first shot. Considerate, affectionate, devoted, and un-exacting, he would have been a pattern lover, but for one serious drawback. His constancy was so far to be calculated on, that he never failed to succumb under a new temptation. A widower, and past forty, he seemed easily captured as a boy; and, notwithstanding his varied experience, was a slave to woman, or, I should rather say, a slave to *women*, still.

With less trouble than he usually had

to take, he discovered the private history of the Paravants, as imparted on their own authority to the world, in the following problematical version :

“The husband was a county gentleman of ancient lineage, owning large estates in Normandy, the Channel Islands, and at the Land’s End. He had spent much of his life abroad—where, two years ago, he met with his present wife under most romantic circumstances—in the Pyrenees, the Tyrol, the Styrian Alps. She was a Hungarian, an Italian, a Moorish Spaniard, a nun in her year of probation, a Levantine Greek ; but her family name was Beltenebrosa, and she claimed to be a countess in her own right. Lisbon had been everywhere ; he knew them on the Continent ; he helped Paravant to carry her off from her convent. She was his illegitimate sister ; his first wife’s niece ; his own natural daughter. At any rate he

vouched for them, and that was enough! Lisbon was known in every capital; received at every court in Europe; had the international scandals of all societies at his fingers'-ends; and if these people were not presentable, would have been sure to find it out."

Deep mourning? Yes. That was for *his* mother—an American lady—a Russian—an Armenian Jewess. She had left some enormous addition to his fortune, already large enough. One don't believe half one hears, and, of course, one can't be too particular; but, really, these are people one ought to know, and if they seem to "get on" at all, one must certainly call!

Thus the world. And, wonderful to say, with one grain of truth in its confused medley of conjecture. Paravant's mother really *did* die a few weeks after his marriage, making him a richer man than before by some hun-

dreds a year, and affording a sufficient reason for that long winter's seclusion, on which his wife laid great stress, as a first necessity for the future development of her plans.

These she explained one December afternoon, with the Mediterranean lipping their feet, calm, soft, and gray as the sky under which it slept, and a dim curl of smoke high in the distant heaven, that it required a second look to identify as rising from the crest of Etna, lost among streaks of cloud.

"It's slow, dear, and stupid enough, I grant you. But after all, it's no worse for you than for me. Do you hate it so very much?"

This was the way to take him, and the lover was hardly yet lost in the husband, so we need not wonder at his answer.

"How can I hate it when *you* are with me? Only there's nothing to do, and I can't get any *decent* cigars!"

"We will remedy both those grievances.

I'll write to your tobacconist at once, and as for something to do—why you shall do lessons with *me*—there!”

He made a long face, and she continued merrily :

“Don't be afraid. I'm not going to scold if you're a good boy. But, seriously, you ought to pick up some French—it's useful in society—and a few words of Italian, if only to swear at Giacomo when he drives us out!”

“That's a temptation! I should swear a great deal. It's no relief when they don't understand you!”

“A little occupation makes the time pass. In three months we may quite well go to England.”

“And then?”

“Then you must do every earthly thing I tell you, and we shall have what people call 'a success.' I don't mean to give out that I

am a gipsy foundling, and you are a small Somersetshire squire."

He winced. "The Paravants are a very old family," said he; "they came in at the Conquest."

"So are the gipsies," she answered laughing. "Old enough, but by no means respectable. Never mind! I've great faith in names. Yours, when properly pronounced, has quite a Norman *ring* in it. I shall put on my cards, Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa!"

"*Neigh!*"—for so he spelt it in his own mind—"what does *neigh* mean? And as for the other word, Bel—how much? I can't say it."

"Then you must learn. It's a foreign fashion, announcing that a lady retains her own rank after marriage. With my black face particularly, if you swear at me in Italian now and then, I shall go down well

enough as the signora. It means nothing here, but they like it in London. I have made up my mind we are to perch at the top of the tree."

He shook his head. "That's not so easy."

"It is, if we go in for being half foreigners. First of all, people want to know *who* you are, then they like to seem to know and tell each other. This ensures exaggeration, both of rank and fortune. Presently we shall make acquaintance with somebody—anybody—and be asked somewhere—anywhere. After that, it will be our own fault if we ever dine with a commoner again!"

"How so?"

"My dear, it's the simplest thing in the world. London fish swarm to the same fly. The bait that takes a minnow takes a salmon. It's just as easy to leave your card

on a duchess as on her next-door neighbour, and she will be just as anxious to know you if she can't make out who on earth you are. *Madame Paravant, née Beltenebrosa!* What a name for the servants to take up, and what a hash they will make of it! You must be very bluff and English—that won't trouble you much—and I must be rather distant and foreign. They'll invent impossible romance for us themselves. Everybody will be dying to know the Paravants, and all the women will fall in love with you."

"And the men with *you!*"

"That's likely enough, and, let me tell you, it's a great help, particularly if *you* seem very fierce and jealous. What fun! I can see it all, like something on the stage."

He did not quite fancy this part of her programme, and changed the subject.

"We'll go home first," said he. "I should like a look round the farm."

“You’ll do nothing of the kind. We must arrive in London with the breath of the sea fresh on us—you know what I mean. When we are once established, we can go to Somersetshire, or elsewhere, as we please.”

“And the poor horses?”

“Have them up to town. That reminds me—you must make up a team, and drive a coach. Nothing ensures a certain position so quick. Four horses, all out of the stable at once, means ten thousand a year!”

He stared. “How did you find that out? You seem to know as much of life as a man.”

“Do you think girls at school keep their eyes shut?” she replied. “Why, at Miss Quilter’s we used to watch the drags pass every day they went out. I could have told you the names of more than half the gentlemen who drove. We could see them quite plain from our garden.”

“Upon my word! And could they see *you?*”

“Oh, yes. Some of them used to take their hats off, and one day, Curly—we called him Curly because we couldn’t find out his real name—threw a nosegay in, right over the wall.”

“To *you*, I suppose?”

“I don’t think so. Annie Macpherson picked it up and kept it in water for a fortnight. She told Miss Quilter it came from her grandpapa!”

“That was a lie. Used you all to tell lies?”

“Only white ones. I don’t think one ought ever to tell a story—a real downright falsehood—unless there is no other possible way out of the difficulty.”

“And then you consider it right?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Everybody does it, but I hate arguing. Let’s go home through

the olives, and down by the Wooden Cross."

The result of such conversations as the foregoing was the appearance of James Paravant, early in May, on that well-appointed coach, with its quick-stepping team, that provoked the criticisms of Lord St. Moritz and his friend.

Where horses were concerned, to do him justice, the Somersetshire squire was seldom at a loss. A little morning practice before the world had breakfasted made him thoroughly at home on his box, and though Potboy proved a most erratic leader, driven on either side, "Forward James" soon began to thread the crowd of carriages that block the Park on a summer's afternoon, with as few bumps and casualties as the best. His team were showy and well-bred, properly put together, which is half the battle. Thanks to his wife's supervision, his own get-up was

irreproachable, and before that handsome woman had been seen beside him on his coach a dozen times, both driving-clubs were prepared to elect him a member without a single black-ball.

She had not miscalculated the effect of her foreign appellation and striking appearance. Everything turned out as she expected. Paravant's driving, with a courteous pull-up or two at critical moments, obtained him some introductions, these led to others, and as every young gentleman felt bound to make acquaintance with the handsome signora, enterprising spirits threw themselves in her husband's way for the purpose. Two claimants for notice yesterday, increased to a dozen to-day, and doffings of hats, once so prized, became valueless when multiplied by scores. Soon people began to leave off asking *who* was this Madame Beltenebrosa—it seemed such a solecism not to know; and when Paravant's coach

stood at Hyde Park Corner, dandies swarmed and clung about it from roof to roller-bolt, like barnacles under the water-line of a rickety old ship homeward bound.

Every man brought his tribute. An order for this, a ticket for that; stalls at the opera, unaccountably at liberty; a box for the French play; racing intelligence to interest the husband, scandal and tittle-tattle to amuse the wife, with whom Prance, of the Foreign Office, commonly called the "Molecatcher," loved to converse in his own peculiar Italian, affording, I imagine, more amusement than he intended, to a lady who herself spoke the language fluently and well.

As the inclemency of May seemed to *give* a little, and the sun shone out with promise of summer for an hour or two, dinners were arranged at Hurlingham, the Orleans Club, Ranelagh, and such suburban resorts frequented by those who are without engage-

ments elsewhere, and who, perhaps simply because they are not asked, would rather be dining in Belgrave Square. These entertainments were much to Paravant's taste: the tone was sporting and not too exclusive, the wine moderate but plentiful, and he could smoke directly after dinner. Beltenebrosa, too, as she began to be called, accepted the hospitalities thus offered, with a calm and gracious dignity, as a foretaste of those more patrician banquets—less easy, less airy, and in every respect less agreeable—of which she intended hereafter to be the ornament. She knew no ladies as yet—that she must arrange for herself, the men could do little for her there; and she resolved from the first, with considerable worldly knowledge, to eschew those doubtful dames who are neither quite in nor quite out of society, but who have a deal of fun, and drive many a successful foray in a certain Debatable Land of their own be-

tween the borders of "found charming" and "found out!" Therefore, Beltenebrosa's voice was low, her manner exceedingly calm and quiet. No flashes of Southern sentiment, no bursts of Southern mirth; above all, no symptoms of gratification in flattery the most delicate, homage the most profound. These things ought to be accepted as a matter of right, and nobody should ever hint she was bad style!

The younger men, professing to understand women thoroughly, confessed themselves at a loss. Coolly and courteously she thanked them for dinners, orders, tickets, and so forth. Equally coolly, equally courteously, without surprise, remonstrance, disapproval, or emotion of any kind, she declined bouquets, gloves, nicknacks, table-ornaments, any article bought in a shop, or that could in any way suggest the possibility of value received. "She's as proud as Lucifer," said

one. "That's the old Genoese blood," asserted another. "I think the husband won't stand it," opined a third; while little Sinnick, fresh from Eton, at one end of a cigar as big as himself, pronounced sententiously:

"You fellows know nothing about it. I spotted her at once. She's a sensible, strong-minded woman. Lots of intellect, you know, but not a particle of heart!"

Triumphs accepted so sedately caused her husband no uneasiness, and perhaps this was the happiest period in Paravant's life. They stayed at an hotel, for she shrewdly observed that might mean anything, from Belgrave Square to Chapel Street, if they had chosen to take a house; and, as he had not yet seen the bill, London seemed a remarkably cheap place to live in. Being well able for the present to pay ready money, tradesmen were obstinate in supplying them with articles of every description on credit; their

acquaintance increased; the horses kept sound; the weather improved; and Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa—a title he mastered after many repetitions—though not demonstratively affectionate, was always the same.

“Forward James” found it a pleasant world, and said so, protesting humbly and honestly that he owed his enviable position entirely to his wife.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FOLLOWING WIND.

LORD ST. MORITZ, when he hunted a fresh distraction, did not allow the grass to grow under his feet; and the first time he met Prance in St. James's Street, hooking him by the arm, he accompanied that gratified young gentleman to the very corner of Pall Mall, and never let go, although a royalty, two Cabinet ministers, and Prance's own chief spoke to his lordship during their walk. Arrived at Sam's, he stopped as if he had just remembered something of no consequence.

“Molecatcher,” said he carelessly, “you know everybody. I see you talking to that

Madame Beltenebrosa in the Park—I mean a black woman who belongs to a man with a coach. I wish you would introduce me.”

“To the black woman, or the man with the coach?” asked Prance jauntily, as he conceived, with the air of a consummate fine gentleman.

“Oh, the husband of course. I must have met her people abroad, and I ought to be civil. Don’t be afraid. I’m not going to interfere with *you*.”

The Molecatcher assented cordially; quoted “St. Moritz” to everybody he met during the afternoon, and, it is to be presumed, fulfilled his engagement; for at 6.30 P.M. the same day his lordship was to be seen sitting behind “the black woman,” making himself exceedingly agreeable to “the man with the coach.”

“That’s the best fellow we’ve come across yet,” said the husband, driving leisurely

home through Stanhope Gate. "And a capital judge of a horse. Spotted Potboy in a moment. Saw at once he could gallop like smoke. Not at all a stuck-up chap, neither, and plenty to say."

"Very likely," answered his wife. "You had all the benefit. He said nothing to *me*." And, indeed, she was revolving in her own mind why this man of all others should have seemed only undisturbed by her beauty, and negligent in offering the tribute of admiration to which she was getting so accustomed now, she claimed it as her due.

That night at the French play, which Paravant considered and declared "infernal rot," she thought of Lord St. Moritz again, wondering whether he would be there; then, why he was *not*. Altogether he came into her mind three or four times before she went to bed, which was exactly what he intended.

Next day Paravant vanished immediately

after breakfast with his new friend to attend a sale of yearlings, and Beltenebrosa, for the first time since she arrived in London, was left by herself. Young Prance, indeed, called, to be succeeded by more of his kind; but she found them insufferably stupid and wearisome. Her gipsy blood grew restless, and she was beginning to fret for some fresh excitement, when the absentee returned, bringing with him his lordship, to whom he offered cooling drinks of every kind, and eventually tea.

“Certainly not,” protested Lord St. Moritz, laughing. “I should drink a farthing’s-worth, and the hotel would charge you a shilling! I cannot encourage such extravagance. No, if Madame Beltenebrosa did not think it would bore her, I should like to offer you both tea at Hurlingham. My barouche is at the door. We can drive down in half an hour, and by that time it will be cool and

pleasant under the trees. What does Madame say ? ”

Madame would like it very much. Madame consented with more animation than usual. Madame had been conjugating a French verb all day, “*Je m’ennuie, tu t’ennuies,*” and so on. Lord St. Moritz probably didn’t know the meaning of the word.

Didn’t he ? Lord St. Moritz had been repeating it all his life—particularly when alone with Lord St. Moritz. Few things amused—nothing interested him—except tea, and Hurlingham, and agreeable company like the present ; but while he took his seat in his own carriage, with his back to the horses, this incorrigible nobleman reflected that there were more verbs than *s’ennuyer* in the French grammar which so handsome a woman might learn to conjugate under his instruction, with much satisfaction to himself.

The closest friendships, I think, begin by imperceptible degrees, and the same may be said of attachments. Beltenebrosa found Lord St. Moritz a more agreeable companion than any of her captives ; but, as she had no hesitation in saying so, I conclude the impression he made must have been on her intellect, rather than her heart. Yet their intimacy was so gradual in its progress, she found it impossible to record the different stages by which distant civility grew to frank courtesy, then warm friendship, tender interest, and—— What was it at the end of a fortnight ? Something very like devotion on one side, and compassion, if nothing kinder, on the other.

He made a great stride in her good graces, and he knew it, by a delicate attention, delicately paid, which cost him more trouble, and to use his own words, forced him “ to eat more dirt ” than she supposed.

They were sitting on penny chairs under a noonday sun, in the Park, Paravant being engaged with an equestrian at the rails. Her parasol was up. It shaded his lordship's white hat, and her own black head. In the crush of a London season few couples can hope to be more alone than this.

"When shall I see you again?" asked the hat of the parasol in a low voice that trembled, or seemed to tremble a little with the simple question. "Are you going to-morrow to Lady Goneril's?"

"You may be sure I'm *not*," answered the parasol, unfurled and defiant. "I don't know her. I don't know any of these ladies who give things?"

"Would it amuse you?"

"Shall *you* be there?"

"Thanks! Then I'm only amusing, after all. And I wanted to be interesting. How you pitch into one sometimes!"

“I don’t. It would hurt my own knuckles. Again, I say, Are *you* going? I don’t care about the rest.”

“I’ll go if you will. Now, *will* you, if she sends an invitation?”

“I’ll see. Don’t look so meek. When I say ‘I’ll see,’ that means, ‘I’ll consider.’ When people consider——”

“They end by doing whatever they like best. *Be* considerate, and say you’ll go—at once. Here’s Paravant.”

There must have been some tacit agreement that Lady Goneril’s invitation would be accepted, or Lord St. Moritz need not have embarked with so much energy on an undertaking that required tact, temper, and a certain subtlety to carry out.

There is nothing about which London ladies are so “touchy” as their invitations. No conceivable request receives so hearty a rebuff as that for a ball-ticket, and the most daring

of admirers can hardly be repulsed more brusquely than the injudicious visitor who presumes on a life-long friendship to implore a card for a third person, well known to both. Nobody understood these matters better than Lord St. Moritz ; but he laid his plans with a thorough knowledge of the ground on which he was working, and consequently with a fair chance of success.

Calculate on a woman's liking for a man, and you are deceived in a hundred ways. Modesty, pique, the spirit of contradiction, a host of such difficulties rise up to baffle you at every turn ; but you may always depend on her hatred of another woman, and in this respect alone can make sure of finding the softest female hearts turn to adamant itself.

St. Moritz, in furtherance of his schemes caused his brougham to set him down at the portals of a house like a palace, where,

once a fortnight, during the London season, a crowded "At Home" collected "everybody" who was "anybody," at some hour of the night between eleven and two. He was as sure of finding Lady Goneril on the marble staircase—still handsome, still hungry for admiration, frizzed, painted, powdered, and with a train seven feet long—as he was of the beautiful hostess to whom he made his bow, receiving in return a quiet but sincere welcome, the perfection of refinement, good-breeding, and feminine grace.

Now, Lady Goneril was Lord St. Moritz's last love *but one*, and though she had long since appointed his successor, retained certain kindly inclinations towards the only man in her whole experience who had used her shamefully ill.

This feeling, however, was not to be compared with the aversion she cherished for Mrs. Stripwell, the lady who supplanted her,

and whom she naturally supposed to be his lordship's present proprietor. That she still felt when she met him what she called a "*serrement de cœur*"—so universal and uncomfortable a qualm that it need not be construed into English—afforded her the utmost satisfaction. It was at least a sensation, and as such she made it welcome.

"My dear," she would say to intimate friends, "there is always some good left in a woman who can *feel*. I had rather know I am wretched than be without sentiment altogether, like a brick wall, or a stone chimney-piece, or that odious little spit-fire, Mrs. Stripwell."

Lord St. Moritz, looking very cool and gentlemanlike, with his crush-hat pressed against his heart, found her ladyship in the very spot he expected, and, accosting her almost affectionately, was accorded a gracious reception. After such customary greetings

as "How well you're looking!" and "What nonsense!" which mean a great deal or nothing at all, she tossed her head, flirted her fan, cleared for action, in short, and started with the apposite inquiry: "Well, how's the Pigmy? She's not coming here to-night I *know*, because she's not asked!"

It was her whim, while admitting the indisputable symmetry of her figure, to decry Mrs. Stripwell's low stature. Lady Goneril herself stood five feet eight inches, full-limbed and well set up, but developing into what is called a "magnificent woman" with alarming rapidity.

"I know she's not, or I shouldn't have come."

Her fan opened and shut with a triumphant flourish.

"What do you mean? Have you had a row? I warned you of her temper. These little women are always tartars!"

“Why do you talk as if she was a dwarf? Chiselli swears she is exactly the size of Canova’s Venus, and as well made.”

“I wonder how he knows? But it’s very easy to have a good figure if one is only two foot high—you used to admire *tall* women.”

“So I do,” said he, thinking of Beltenebrosa, but affording Lady Goneril much satisfaction by the admission.

“Well?” she continued. “Go on; there’s been a quarrel, I see. You surely haven’t come to *me* to make it up!”

“I come to you because I’m annoyed. I think I have a right to be. I want to ask your opinion. It’s a question of feeling; and I’m sure, Lady Goneril, you have a good heart.”

“No I haven’t. I had once. Never mind, that’s past and done with. Take me to the tea-room, and tell me all about it.”

As they threaded the crowd arm-in-arm, intending deserters looked guiltily on faces where they owed allegiance, while ladies who had no reason as yet to expect disloyalty cast approving glances on a companionship that argued the renewal of bonds sadly strained, if not actually snapped ; but nobody made any verbal remark. It is not the custom of good society.

Scandals which have no real existence are proclaimed by a thousand tongues, but a discreet silence is observed in well-bred circles on matters which may be deprecated and deplored, but cannot admit of doubt. Neither do people in London catechise us on our future movements, and past performances, so severely as do our country friends. I hope it is not because, judging from their own observation and experience, they have decided our conduct will not bear too close investigation !

In the tea-room, fifty feet long, were but

four other couples, wholly engrossed with their own affairs. In such a retreat and behind such a fan as Lady Goneril's, they could hardly have been more alone in the Moor of Rannoch, the morning-room at White's, the upper end of Wimpole Street, or any other solitude you like to mention. Lord St. Moritz made his plunge.

“Don't you think, when a man has devoted himself to one lady for more than three months, she ought to make *some* sacrifice for his sake?”

“Good gracious, no! What an odd question!”

“Then we differ. Probably I am wrong, and yet I believe, if I were to ask *you* to drive three yards down a street, and leave cards at a door, you wouldn't tell me, in polite language, you would see me hanged first!”

“How like her!” exclaimed Lady Goneril, jumping to a conclusion at once, and forgetting

the *esprit de corps* on the calling question, very strong among ladies of her calibre, in the delight of reviling and possibly discomfiting a rival. "Didn't I always tell you she has no more heart than—a—*man!*"

"I begin to think you must be right, and yet she looks so soft and gentle. I wonder what it was in her that made a fool of me. Upon my word, I sometimes begin to believe in magic. Ah! I wish I could live the last year over again."

"I wish we all could. And yet, I dare say it would bore us. Well, go on."

"There are some people from the West of England I wish to be civil to. I don't suppose you ever heard of them. A Mr. and Mrs. Paravant. They know positively nobody, and I have reasons for wanting to do *him* a turn, so I asked Mrs. Stripwell to leave her card, and she positively refused."

"I *have* heard of them. A vulgar man

with a vulgar wife, who sets up for a beauty. I haven't seen her. *Is she handsome?*”

“Yes. You can't help admitting it. But much too dark. Almost like the gipsies you see at Ascot.”

Lady Goneril reflected. These swarthy beauties certainly never were to his taste. Her own locks had been successfully gilt for so long, she hardly remembered their natural shade, but her eyes were gray and eyebrows brown, when she let them alone. Mrs. Stripwell, too, though figure was her strong point, had a pretty little innocent red and white face, surmounted by a touzle of hair like fluffy yellow silk. These considerations decided her ladyship. She became a partisan at once.

“Would you like me to send her a card for to-morrow? It's one of my *omnium gatherums*. She would meet lots of people. And after all, it commits one to nothing.”

He was cunning enough to affect a hesitation which clenched the business. "I don't know," said he doubtfully. "It's *very* kind of *you*, dear Lady Goneril. Nobody is so good a friend. But—it would distress poor Mrs. Stripwell sadly. She has chosen to set her face against those people, and will take it dreadfully to heart if she meets them at any *good* places—like yours, for instance. I shouldn't wonder if it made her ill!"

Beltenebrosa coming down to breakfast next morning, was more surprised than we need be by a square envelope lying on her plate, which, being torn open, disclosed a large card, intimating the certainty of finding Lady Goneril in her own house at a given time. This was followed later in the day by three smaller tickets, representing a personal visit from herself and a gentleman then at Cowes, whom she was good enough to call her lord.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FLOOD-TIDE.

THERE is many a progress in which, as in walking with your head under your arm, the first step is more than half the battle.

Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, was admitted, literally by acclamation, to be the handsomest woman in Lady Goneril's drawing-room; and, indeed, with a shade more colour, would have been acknowledged the beauty of the season. Everybody asked to be introduced, even the ladies, who, seeing how it set, thought well to swim with the tide. Prance received three invitations to dinner, solely in virtue of his acquaintance with such a paragon. An illustrious per-

sonage stood by her side nearly five minutes, offering with admirable tact the homage of a gentleman, rather than displaying the condescension of a prince. "Black but comely" was the verdict of his equerry; and by one o'clock in the morning every soul in the room had become, or tried to become, acquainted with Madame Beltenebrosa.

Lady Goneril, indeed, would have wished she had not asked her, but for the mortification she desired to inflict on Mrs. Stripwell, also invited (for sufficient reasons), though an enemy. That provoking little woman however appeared thoroughly unconscious of the annoyance; flirting, according to custom, with a succession of admirers in regular rotation, calm, self-possessed, and cool as a cucumber, partly from temperament, partly from the shape and texture of her dress—delicate, transparent, and cut exceedingly low. She yawned at intervals, nevertheless,

and looked round more than once as if for somebody who never came.

That somebody was ten miles off, dining sedately at Richmond, after a pull on the river with two old Eton friends. His absence was by no means accidental, but rather the result of studied calculation. He reflected that, on Beltenebrosa's first appearance in the *real* London world, her attention would be necessarily engrossed by the novelty of such a situation, and amongst so many fresh triumphs, an admirer of yesterday, however deserving, would be at a disadvantage. There is no position so difficult to maintain as the proprietorship, in any degree, of an acknowledged beauty. That discomfort he resolved should fall to Paravant, who had a legal right to it; and a cigar by moonlight on a terrace overlooking the river, was surely better pastime than a succession of spasmodic efforts to hold his own against the most dangerous com-

petitors in the land, all of whom had the odds of novelty in their favour. To-morrow, *he* would be a fresh excitement in his turn. At this moment she was surely wondering what had become of him ; piqued, no doubt, and even a little angry at his desertion. “For,” argued his lordship, “women are so insatiable, that ninety-nine captives lose something of their value when one more is wanting to make up the hundred, and I daresay, if the truth were known, she misses me at this moment as much as I do her !”

The old campaigner was little out in his reckoning. There were three women watching the door for him that night, with uneasy hearts, though different degrees of interest. Lady Goneril was more vexed than disappointed, because, as she said to herself, “It’s so *like* him, one never knows what he will do next !” Mrs. Stripwell felt surprised to find she cared for him so much, and regretted,

absolutely regretted, she had put on this most attractive of all her dresses, instead of the lilac, that came up an inch higher, and became her beauty a shade worse ; while Beltenebrosa, through all her triumph, in the consciousness that her foot was on the ladder at last, felt with a twinge, keen enough to be painful, how much she missed the quiet, amusing, half-caustic, half-indulgent mentor, who told her all about everybody, with something good, bad, and indifferent, but generally untrue, to say of each.

A fourth person was also most uncomfortable, as being thoroughly out of his element. Paravant would have felt much happier with St. Moritz at his elbow, for that gentleman, who possessed no scruples, but much tact, never allowed his new acquaintance to discover he was "not in the swim," and treated him with all the deference to which "Forward James" thought himself entitled ;

whereas, to-night, nobody took much notice of him, and but for Prance, who had compassion at intervals, he would have been a hermit in a crowd. Our friend did not at all fancy being neglected, and was by no means disposed to sink without protest into a mere supernumerary, as the husband of Madame Beltenebrosa. For the first time since their marriage, he showed symptoms of ill-humour going home.

“I don’t think much of these drums, as they call them,” said he, flouncing into his corner of the brougham with some petulance. “There’s no fun in them—no dancing, no life, no *go!* I shan’t come again; I’d much rather have been smoking a cigar outside.”

But Beltenebrosa, flushed with conquest, could by no means agree.

“They are a necessity of one’s position, my dear,” she replied, smiling inwardly at the airs she was assuming. “They lead to

everything else, you know. Of course it's stupid, but one mustn't mind that."

"Stupid! *You* didn't seem to think it stupid. I was wondering what you could find to jabber about. I didn't know you liked to have a lot of stuck-up chaps bothering and talking no end of rot, and what I call standing on their hind-legs for you; I thought you were a different kind of woman altogether."

"So I am, dear," she replied, in perfect good-humour. "I'm sure I was much happier in Italy than *you* were; but if we had been at Rome, we should have done like the people at Rome. Of course, with royalty, and all that, one *must* be as pleasant as one can. I'm sorry you found it a bore."

He was still a little in love, so only grumbled a few disjointed murmurs about "conceited asses" and "London assurance," ending with a declaration that "he should like to go home to Somersetshire at once."

“So we will, dear,” she assented; “nothing will please me better—after Ascot.”

“Ascot!” he repeated aghast. “You surely don’t want to go to Ascot!”

“I suppose we must. His Royal Highness seemed to think it a matter of course. He told me Vermuth was sure to win the Cup. Yes, dear, I must take you to Ascot, if only as a question of business.”

“How?”

“Well, you know, people can’t live as we are doing without spending money. The hotel bills will run up to something frightful, and four horses don’t stand at livery for nothing.”

“Besides your dresses. They cost more than the horses, I’ll be bound.”

“Besides my dresses—yes, we shall want all the ready-money we can lay our hands on. Now, you understand racing *thoroughly*, don’t you?”

“Well, I think I’m as wide awake as my

neighbours. The sharpest of 'em must get up pretty early to put *me* in the hole !”

He spoke in a tone of confidence that would have warmed the cockles of a ring-man's heart; for those, I imagine, that lay claim to the wisdom of the serpent are the most profitable kind of doves; and his wife, with a twinge of conscience, as she remembered the five hundred pounds, long since spent, and still owing to Mervyn Strange, persuaded herself that the acuteness he professed might be turned to some account.

“Then we will go to Ascot,” said she pleasantly, “like the rest of the world. I shall only want two new dresses, and you might send the team down and drive it to the course. I'll find out all about that. I've been promised tickets for the Enclosure. I've done *my* share. I leave you to get a hint about the racing—what you call *the straight tip*. I never meddle with matters I don't understand.”

She had wheedled him into good-humour.

“Quite right,” said he; “you’ve got that pretty head of yours screwed on the right way after all. Here we are. Now for a B-and-S, one quiet cigar, and then bed!”

But over that cigar Paravant reflected more than in any previous meditations since his marriage. His life seemed running into a groove very different from that which he would have chosen for himself. The future he used to paint was perhaps in no way more domestic than his present career, but the central figure of its grouping was his own, not his wife’s. He had hoped for sporting triumphs and social successes easily obtained near his rustic home. To be reckoned the fastest young fellow in the county—who had run off with the handsomest woman; a good shot; a thorough sportsman; owner—perhaps rider—of a winner at Swansdown Races: such were the milder glories that would have satisfied

his ambition and cost him but little effort to attain. Now he seemed embarked on far more hazardous courses, though he could not deny they lay altogether in a loftier sphere. He was playing higher stakes, and with less certainty of winning. In the society to which his wife's beauty gave him access, he already discovered that he must *do* something and *be* something himself if he would not sink into the mere appendage of a woman's belongings. His brief experience of life had already shown him men accepted, even caressed, by the world for no good quality or merit whatever, but a happy knack of possessing, perhaps only of backing, winning horses, and, what such speculators could do well, he was vain enough to believe he could do better!

“Yes, she's right enough,” he said to himself, drawing off his B-and-S at one defiant gulp; “Ascot is the best plan after all. Let me only see them gallop down the course, and

I flatter myself I can spot the winner as fast as the numbers go up; otherwise, what's the use of a good eye for make and shape, and a memory that seldom plays me false. I remember her saying once 'It's as easy to catch a salmon as a sprat.' The same holds good with racing. If you're not out in a thirty-pound selling-plate you may make a good shot at the Ascot Cup. I was never afraid to back my opinion. Yes, we *will* go to Ascot; and it's very strange if I don't come back with something like *a thou.* to the good!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CARRYING ON.

A LONDON season soon slips away. Town never seems really full till just before the Derby; then comes a week of clouds and rain, spent in exchanging meteorological lamentations and hopes for a change, dinners, plays, balls, receptions, and, lo! Ascot is upon us before we have time to turn round. That pleasant gathering, and the Whitsuntide holidays, empty the Park of its surplus and fill a good many country houses to overflowing; but with the hot weather people return to crowded staircases and suffocating dinners, till startled by questions concerning Goodwood—premonitory symptoms of the end. Presently cabs,

piled with luggage, are to be seen in greater numbers day by day. Leaves droop in the squares, water-carts omit their rounds, girls grow pale, chaperones haggard, and the carriage-horses go down in their action. Dresses are packed, bills left unpaid, thermometers stand at eighty degrees in the shade; and so comes Goodwood, and after Goodwood—the Deluge!

In the meantime, one of the great landmarks of summer has been reached, and “the world of fashion”—to use an expression of the morning papers—migrates into Berkshire. Furnished houses within a drive of Ascot race-course have risen to fabulous prices; eight-roomed cottages in Windsor Forest command rentals that, on a yearly calculation, would seem exorbitant for Windsor Castle.

Lord St. Moritz, with considerable forethought, has secured a *bijou* residence within a mile of the Grand-stand, from Monday to

Saturday, at something like the rate of twenty shillings an hour, and considers it rather a bargain! He has sent down servants, provisions, wines, scented soap, and every other luxury, to this picturesque little retreat, where fruit and flowers are already in profusion. He has inspected the arrangements himself, and made a careful selection of guests. Paravant and Madame Beltenebrosa are of the party, and it is ten o'clock P.M., the night before the Cup Day.

Dinner is over; champagne has been drunk freely; claret in moderation; and coffee is served in a little gem of a drawing-room, having French windows opening to the lawn. A lovely night, with myriads of stars, tempts the ladies out of doors, and patches of white dot the shadows cast by a fine old cypress across the sward. Stocks, cloves, and picotees add their perfume to the fragrance of new-mown hay from a meadow outside; the young

moon is rising behind a group of sturdy oaks, of which the topmost branches have hardly yet put forth their summer leaves; and a nightingale trills and gurgles persistently in a neighbouring copse, the private property of Her Majesty the Queen.

No wonder the gentlemen stroll out of a deserted drawing-room to these enchanted grounds. Prance lights a cigarette with permission, Paravant a regalia without, and Lord St. Moritz drops into a rustic chair by the side of Beltenebrosa.

He has not seen her for two whole days—eight-and-forty hours! And as she sat apart from him at dinner—for neither prejudice nor predilection can overrule the table of precedence laid down by Burke—has had no opportunity of telling her so.

She had been asked to come on Monday afternoon for Tuesday's racing, but, wise in her generation, did nothing of the kind. She

promised, however, to be down early on Wednesday, yet deferred that engagement also at the last moment, and only arrived with her maid by a late train in time for dinner.

To Paravant, whom she despatched on the Tuesday after breakfast, that he might not lose two days' racing, she condescended to explain :

“My dear,” said she, in the tone of good-humoured indifference to which she had gradually accustomed him, “gentlemen cannot understand these things, but I don't mind telling *you*. I am like Mrs. John Gilpin—

For though on pleasure she was bent,
She had a frugal mind.

I only ordered two new dresses, these will come perfectly fresh on Thursday and Friday. They are rather pretty, and I flatter myself Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, will not

look such a dowdy among the best ! Now do you see ?”

He did *not*, wondering inwardly why a day's rest and a smoothing-iron should fail to reproduce either of these costumes as good as new, but, feeling weak on this point, abandoned the argument to equip himself for the races, where, trusting to his own judgment, he spotted two winners and won three hundred pounds.

I have my doubts, however, as to the validity of his wife's excuses, and am inclined to think that her deferred appearance at such a social gathering was the result of deep consideration, not without insight into the peculiarities of human nature.

“I shall be expected,” she thought, “on Tuesday, and when they see ‘Forward James,’ who is sure to make himself conspicuous, they will ask why I am not there ? By three o'clock on Wednesday the Molecatcher and

his tribe will have found out many reasons for my absence, all calculated to promote gossip, even scandal. I shall be credited with every kind of vagary. The men will say I have quarrelled with Lord St. Moritz, or run away from my husband. And the women will declare I am laid up at home with the mumps! But they will talk about me, that is the great point, and when I *do* appear on the Cup Day all London will be down, and I shall be an object of general interest (for, after all, the world is a great fool), and perhaps in my pale lavender, with black lace, even of admiration. It's hard on my host, I admit, but he will like me none the worse, I fancy. Besides, he has had two nice little letters, and I mean to be very good to him while I'm there."

In pursuance of this virtuous resolution, Beltenebrosa showed her appreciation of Lord St. Moritz a little more unreservedly than

usual; and that nobleman, who calculated such matters to a nicety, felt no reason to be dissatisfied with the trouble he had taken in arranging his Ascot party, or the rent he was paying for his house.

A man of experience, though his heart may be in danger, seldom loses his head. Lord St. Moritz was an old and practised player at that game, in which one or other is usually a heavy loser; but his was a nature, not uncommon among his class, that displays more and more skill with increase of stakes. Always most in earnest when he seemed least so, a woman could never calculate on his actions or his motives, as Lady Goneril did not mind confessing she found out, to her cost.

He had been exceedingly attentive to her all day on the course, and neglected Mrs. Stripwell in proportion, who consequently sulked the whole afternoon, and if her maid can be credited, shed tears while dressing for

dinner. Neither lady could have joined his lordship's party, owing to previous engagements, but both felt aggrieved not to be asked. The former, thinking some unusual duplicity must be concealed under his apparent return to allegiance, resolved to watch him narrowly, "determined," as she herself expressed it, "to find out what he was at!"

For the present, however, she was a good three miles off, with quite enough on hand to occupy her attention, besides a cup of coffee at her side, a rose in her lap, and the glowing end of a cigar some six inches from her ear, behind which lurked an exceedingly pleasant young gentleman, inclined to make himself more than usually agreeable.

"I'm glad you like it," said Lord St. Moritz, as what else could he say, in reply to a well-merited compliment from his guest, on the selection of this charming spot for their revels? "It wasn't so nice last night, nor

the night before. Why didn't you come on Monday?"

"Now you're going to scold me."

"Should you mind if I did?"

"I should take it as the highest compliment. When I scold people, it means I really *do* care for everything belonging to them."

"Do you ever scold Paravant?"

It was a *gaucherie*, as he felt, even while the words escaped his lips. Only a schoolboy would have reminded her of her husband at such a time, but he picked himself up adroitly enough, and added :

"He don't deserve it to-day. Quite the reverse. He landed two hundred, I think he told me, backing an outsider. I was so pleased."

"That's very kind."

"I *was*. You may think it strange, but I assure you I like Paravant for his own sake."

“Not the least strange. So do I.”

“Yes, but I like him a great deal more for *yours*. If you had a dog (let me put down your coffee-cup) I should be fond of it. I believe I should even wish to change places with it.”

“Suppose I don’t care for dogs,” said she, rising from her seat, with a woman’s instinctive shrinking from a subject which nevertheless she delighted to approach.

“I would accept the kicks, and take my chance of the halfpence,” he replied laughing, but added, in a graver tone: “I wish I could find out exactly what you *do* care for.”

“It’s no use wishing,” she murmured, with a low soft sigh, that emboldened him to steal his hand into her own.

Her mood changed on the instant, and snatching it away, she turned towards the window of the well-lit drawing-room.

“Not yet,” he pleaded, “don’t go in yet.

Once round the lawn and back through the shrubbery to hear the nightingales sing.”

Whether she relented or meant to persist in re-entering the house, must remain uncertain. His name was called by half-a-dozen voices, to remind him that the first duty of a host is towards his guests not individually but collectively. “Lord St. Moritz! Lord St. Moritz!” they clamoured, “we will appeal to Lord St. Moritz!” and they crowded into the glare of the windows, offering their opinions, with a great deal of noise and laughter, while they pressed for his verdict.

The discussion was on no less important a subject than that of dress as worn at the races by two rival beauties, one of whom was Mrs. Stripwell herself, the other a fair importation from New York, with the most charming little nose ever employed as an organ of speech. Prance, having a speciality for such matters, knew with certainty that the artist

who decorated the English lady was a London celebrity, outrageous in price, whereas the fair American's costume came of course from Paris, and might be a trifle dearer. The bill, indeed, as sent to papa's counting-house, seemed positively awful in francs, and not to be calmly contemplated in dollars. "Now, which was the best dressed of these two ladies? Not the handsomest, that had nothing to do with it. Lord St. Moritz would hardly be a fair judge." This little shaft, aimed by a damsel who thought she had been somewhat neglected during the evening, was meant to reach the gipsy, but fell harmless, for Beltenebrosa was thinking of something else. The question lay wholly between *two* dresses. One crimson-and-orange, the other purple-and-green; loud, not to say daring colours, and, to use a French expression, that swore at each other hideously. Yet, thus boldly placed in juxtaposition, producing a certain picturesque effect, startling

indeed, but sufficiently pleasing to the crowd.

Prance and Lady Mary voted for crimson-and-orange, all the others for purple-and-green. What did Lord St. Moritz think ?

Lord St. Moritz thought them "neat but gaudy." Lord St. Moritz declared Lady Mary's own simple little toilet of white and jessamine in better taste than either. Lord St. Moritz cursed both dresses in his heart, and was incautious enough to express an opinion that Madame Beltenebrosa would appear in something to-morrow that should cause both Mrs. Stripwell and the pretty Yankee to wish they had stayed at home !

Here elbows touched their neighbours, and the meaning smile on more than one face deepened to a sneer. A tide of dislike seemed setting towards the "Signora," and Lord St. Moritz decided to stem it by adjourning to

the house with a proposal of music, and a hope that somebody would sing.

“What says Madame Beltenebrosa?” asked Lady Mary, rather viciously. “She seems to be queen.”

“I wish I were,” answered the gipsy, in perfect good-humour.

“You’d make a very beautiful one,” exclaimed Prance, with enthusiasm.

“You would have *one* loyal subject,” whispered the host, with devotion.

“Why, what would you do?” snapped her ladyship.

“I’ll tell you,” said Beltenebrosa, seating herself at the pianoforte. “I am sure my own sex would like to put me on the throne at once.”

If I were a queen I’d make it the rule
For women to govern and men obey;
And hobbledehoyes to be kept at school,
And elderly gentlemen hidden away.
But maids should marry at sweet sixteen—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen!

If I were a queen I'd soon arrange
For a London season the whole year round ;
And once a week, if we wanted a change,
We would dine by the river and sit on the ground,
When lawns are sunny, and leaves are green—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen !

If I were a queen, the lady should choose,
Taking her pick of them, round and square ;
None selected should ever refuse,
Bound to wed, be she dark or fair,
Stout and stumpy, or lank and lean—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen !

If I were a queen, on Valentine's day
Every girl should receive by post,
Flaming letters in full array,
Of darts and hearts burnt up to a toast ;
With bows and arrows, and Cupids between—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen !

If I were a queen, I'd never allow
Tax on unregistered goods like these—
A woman's reason, a lover's vow,
A stolen kiss, or a silent squeeze ;
A wish unspoken, a blush unseen—
If I were a queen, if I were a queen !

“Bravo! Beautiful! Capital! What fun! Thank you!” exclaimed the audience. But Lord St. Moritz, bending over the pianoforte, whispered: “Always a queen. *My* queen. This is better than the nightingales!”

CHAPTER XXIX.

BREAKERS AHEAD !

A ROOMY loose-box, littered in the whitest and smoothest straw, plaited round the edges with as much taste and skill as a dunstable bonnet ; a manger, from which the last feed of oats has been eaten so heartily, that not a grain is left. A set of horse-clothing, lettered, braided, and bound, with no less ingenuity of ornament than the mocassins of an Indian brave. At one end a long square tail, combed and brushed to a nicety, large hocks, powerful thighs, and round well-turned quarters, throwing off the light like a satin robe ; at the other, a firm, muscular neck, topped by a lean and handsome head, with the liquid eyes of a deer.

full, deep, wistful, courageous, yet not devoid of sadness, such as impart its touching beauty to that most sensitive and daring of animals, the thoroughbred horse.

A step is heard outside, the door opens, and a short, stout, rosy-faced man enters, with a ring-key in his hand. This worthy looks, and indeed *is*, honest as the day. Shall I say as any of the days? So long as wasting and starvation enabled him to ride the weights, he was a jockey of unflinching integrity. As a trainer, he is equally trustworthy, and his employer, a French gentleman, who brings the natural genius for method to bear on his management of a racing-stable, with considerable success, has exported him from Newmarket to Normandy, solely because of the high character he bears in his profession.

He dearly loves the animals in his charge, and would fain ride them their gallops, even now; but though his attire is of a shape and

texture expressly intended for horse-exercise, its fit seems so tight as to involve insuperable difficulties in getting up.

For several minutes he stands motionless, admiring this masterpiece of nature, perfected by art, his own art, in which he excels; then lifting the embroidered quarter-piece, passes his hand along the smooth supple skin, that plays over those mighty ribs, like silk on steel.

“*You’ll* do!” he murmurs, shaking his head with profound sagacity. “It’s your job this is, and your journey, and your *day* too, if I’m not mistaken. Frenchman, do they call you? And they’re laying five to two, are they? Well, you *may* be a Frenchman, but if you and I don’t carry the cup home between us, I’m a Dutchman, and that’s all about it!”

The horse seems to understand, accepting the liberty taken with his person as a caress, to be acknowledged by a playful flourish of his

tail, while he lays back his ears, and catches the manger between his teeth, in which amiable frame of mind he will be forthwith led out saddled and mounted, to become the object of many thousand admiring eyes as one principal attraction of the day, for this is Vermuth, a winner of the French Derby, and the talent are laying but short odds against him for the Ascot Cup.

An easy garden-seat, with a back at the proper angle, in that privileged enclosure near the Royal Stand, to which access is attained by favour of the noble Master of the Buckhounds, whose life is made a burden to him with shoals of impossible applications, for weeks beforehand. A soft summer sky, shaded by mackerel clouds overhead, a panorama of England's loveliest scenery, stretching to a wide horizon around. In front, a crowded plain, dotted with booths, and flags, and snowy tents, and gaudy marquees, swarming

with holiday-makers in thousands, and carriages in hundreds, and drags in scores, bordered by a well-kept lane of green, wherein a preliminary gallop of variegated jockeys shows like a bed of tulips in a breeze. Behind, stands, filled to overflowing, pillars to roof with a sea of faces turned one way, and on either side the pick of our English aristocracy—men, strong, well-built, upstanding—women, fair, gracious, stately, the handsomest, if not always the best-dressed, in Europe.

Many are the looks directed at the garden-seat above-mentioned. Elaborate and severe are the criticisms on costume, complexion, bearing, manners, character, and antecedents of its occupant, surrounded as she is by admirers, who neglect their attachments, their tobacco, their luncheons, even their betting-books, to win the smiles of which that delicate handsome face is exceedingly sparing. In her airy toilet of pale lavender and filmy

black lace, so becoming to the exquisite shape, clear skin, and shining black hair, she is looking her best, and has been told so indeed many score of times.

Yes, like Vermuth, it is *her* day too, and she shares with that distinguished quadruped the homage of the multitude, for this is Beltenebrosa, the handsome gipsy-looking woman, who has taken the town by storm, and toppled down half-a-dozen acknowledged beauties from their pedestals in as many weeks.

When the French horse was brought out to be saddled, she felt with a thrill of gratified vanity, that this equine celebrity hardly distracted attention from herself.

Paravant indeed, who could see as much of her as he wanted at home, scanned Vermuth with eager and inquiring eyes. Prejudiced, perhaps, against its nationality, and aware that, as regards training, our neighbours have

yet something to learn, he felt persuaded the animal was not properly prepared, and must be defeated by the severity of a long and trying course that finished up-hill.

“Too big!” he said to himself, pulling the pencil from his betting-book. “Want of puff will stop him! Steelboy’s a rare little horse. If they only make the pace good enough he ought to walk in by himself;” and “Forward James,” shouldering his way through masses of spectators, offered his five-to-two, and eventually two-to-one, against “the Frenchman,” with more confidence than prudence, till he stood to lose or win a considerable stake on the event.

“What a beautiful creature!” exclaimed Lady Goneril, with her glasses pointed at Vermuth, pacing proudly under his little rider in cerise and gold.

“She is, indeed!” assented Prance, thinking the remark applied to Beltenebrosa, off

whom he had not taken his eyes for several seconds ; “ I never saw her look so well. Don't you agree with me, Lady Goneril, that's far and away the prettiest get-up on the course ? ”

I appeal to the whole sex, whether her ladyship was not justified in giving battle at once.

“ D'you mean that Paravant woman, who calls herself by some outlandish name ? ” she exclaimed, in high dudgeon. “ No, I don't ! She looks like a slate-pencil dipped in ink. Mr. Prance, I'm sorry for your taste.”

Now the Molecatcher prided himself on discrimination in matters of costume, and although he stood somewhat in awe of Lady Goneril's lofty stature and uncompromising opinions, or, as he called them, “ her uprightness and downrightness,” such an assertion, in his present state of slavish admiration, could not pass unchallenged.

“ It's not MY taste alone ! ” said the little man

rebelliously ; “ even Mrs. Stripwell thought the dress becoming ; and as to the lady herself, only count the men she has got round her, Lady Goneril—that’s the best criterion of good looks.”

As Lord St. Moritz was just then unfurling the parasol, and whispering in the ear of his guest, the Molecatcher’s observation showed a superfluity of neither tact nor *savoir-faire*.

“ Men ! ” repeated Lady Goneril, in accents of withering scorn ; “ dancing dogs and monkeys I call them ! Do you think they mob her because she is beautiful ? Not a bit ; only because she is strange. Do you see that gipsy girl grinning at the rails, with a tambourine ? If I were to wash and dress her up she’d be very like your Madame ‘ What’s-her-name,’ only better-looking, because she has a healthier colour.”

He could stand to his guns no longer. “ She is pale, I admit,” said he, with another

glance at the cause he was deserting, "but I never saw her so white as to-day. Good heavens! She's going to faint!"

"Going to be sick, more likely," returned her ladyship, whose own luncheon had been copious and unwholesome, while she adjusted her glasses for another look at Vermuth, sweeping up the course, with a long easy stride, that caused Paravant an uncomfortable spasm, as he almost wished he had "let the Frenchman alone."

His wife turned indeed pale to her lips, and, for a moment, gasped as if she was choking. Lord St. Moritz rushed off to get a glass of water, but she recovered composure before he returned.

Like Lady Goneril, she had noticed the gipsy girl with a tambourine, and recognised Nance, who waited on her in Fighting Jack's caravan. Worse! She felt sure that Nance recognised *her*!

Damocles, so often quoted in illustration of an uncomfortable position, no doubt forgot the impending sword for many minutes together. We accustom ourselves to the most precarious situations; and Beltenebrosa, since her marriage, especially of late, while moving in a sphere so remote from theirs, had ceased to think of her fellow-wanderers, or to recall the threats with which Jericho warned her against the mortal offence she had committed in uniting herself to a Gorgio.

But now, with her first glance at Nance's swarthy face, came back, in overwhelming force, the memories and apprehensions she had hidden away. Recalling the character of her young gipsy kinsman, his sentiments, his denunciations, his cruelty, cunning, and fierce vindictive nature, she turned faint and sick with fear.

Everything seemed changed. The sky was no longer soft, the foreground gay, nor the

distance fair. The inferiority of a rival ceased to yield triumph, the compliment of an admirer to afford gratification. There was no pleasure in seeing Mrs. Stripwell's sulk and Lady Goneril's sneer, but there seemed something consolatory in the devotion of Lord St. Moritz, and she began to feel a sense of dependence on his lordship, a consciousness she was safer with him at her side, that, could he have known it, would have delighted him exceedingly.

Take a million of people, however, all of whom individually, in thought and feeling, are distinct as light from darkness, and it is surprising how, collectively, they are roused alike, by a common interest, a common excitement, or a common panic. Not one in a hundred, not one in a thousand, of the crowd thronging Ascot Heath but was more or less a partisan of the French or English horse, as the tide of popularity swayed from one to the

other favourite, for the great race of the day. It speaks well for John Bull's hospitality and love of fair-play that Vermuth should have had the call; and I may mention that, when mounted, he rose to even betting in the ring, while five-to-two could be got about Steelboy, and even three-to-one.

In the enclosure gloves were wagered by the basketful, besides lockets, bracelets, and other jewellery; nay, there were not a few fair speculators who ventured pocket and pin-money, and deeper stakes yet, that they little dreamed of at the time. Even Beltenebrosa forgot her apprehensions for a moment when the saddling-bell rang. And now the numbers are up, the horses mounted. Two, three, five, seven, eight, and eleven, come striding by, looking, to the uninitiated, one as good as another, each a paragon of its kind, beautiful, courageous, enduring, as poor Lindsey Gordon hath it—

A tower of strength with a turn of speed.

And it requires, indeed, a practised eye to foresee that this little troop of the swiftest creatures on earth will be drawn out, at the finish, in a string some hundred and fifty paces long.

“Four is scratched and six don’t start,” says Prance, opening his glasses; but this information, being already made public by the absence of their numbers on the board, is received with little interest, and the opinion of Lord St. Moritz that Vermuth will certainly win excites far more attention.

“I have just seen the Vicomte,” he whispers to Beltenebrosa; “the horse is as well as can be. If he runs on his merits I don’t see how he can lose.”

Paravant, close behind, overhears, and bites his lip. Has he been too confident? “I hope not,” he proclaims aloud, for the benefit of all whom it may concern. “I’ve stood against him to the shirt on my back. I’ve more than half a mind to hedge.”

“It’s too late to get out now,” observes his lordship, with one of those smiles that denote neither mirth nor benevolence. “They’re at the post by this time. It’s a false start! No! By Jove, they’re off!”

The glasses all turn one way—love, hatred, rivalry, flirtation, everything is forgotten but the race—from the duchess at the back of the royal box to the drab in front of the royal circus; myriads of hearts and eyes are riveted on a level streak of rainbow colours, that dance, and shift, and mingle, like the hues in a kaleidoscope held with unsteady hand.

There will be a roar presently to shake the earth, but in the eager hush of attention now such observations as these are audible enough:

“What’s that in front? Blue and black cap?”

“That’s Outlaw, making running for Vermuth—making it a cracker too!”

“He’s shot his bolt—Steelboy’s leading! He’s a length in front. Well done, little ’un! By Jove, what a merry pace it is! Some of them will never get home at all!”

“Outlaw’s beat, and so is Python. I knew *he* couldn’t stay. What’s that next the rails? It’s the French horse, and he’s coming up, hand-over-hand.”

“Not he! Steelboy’s caught him! He’s changed his leg. No, he hasn’t! Steelboy! The Frenchman! Sit down and ride him! Steelboy’s beat! Not a bit of it! Now for a set-to! Vermuth wins! It’s a slashing race!”

But it *wasn’t* a slashing race; the favourite, well-served by his stable-companion—whose jockey took care it should be run to suit him—ridden, moreover, with admirable patience and judgment, was pronounced by those who understand such matters to have won cleverly, as they called it, with something in hand.

“Forward James” thought so too. His confidence in his own judgment had cost him more hundreds than he liked to count, and he found little to console him in a conversation he happened to overhear between the owner and a most enthusiastic backer, while Vermuth, with a bottle clinking against his snaffle, was being unsaddled after victory.

Said the Vicomte—a dry, reserved, and very undemonstrative person — apparently quite unmoved by his victory :

“ *Eh bien ! Alphonse, ne t'avais-je pas averti ?* ”

“ *Parbleu ! mon cher,* ” replied Alphonse, triumphant—resplendent Gascony written in every line of his round portly figure, his handsome, swarthy, Southern face. “ *C'est-à-dire, que tu m'as follement payé la goutte ?* ”

Paravant listened, and caught the allusion, and partly understood, cursing the French horse and the blissful Frenchman freely in his heart.

CHAPTER XXX.

SHOAL WATER.

DINNER at the *Bijou* did not go off so swimmingly as yesterday. Few people have spirits inexhaustible enough to last out three days of merrymaking in the same company; and it requires a fund of originality, that may well be called genius, to afford consecutive topics of conversation, hot-and-hot, as it were, to jaded pleasure-seekers, hardly caring to be amused.

Racing, too, though an exciting pastime, is not without a reaction, tending to make its votaries—especially the losers—thoughtful and depressed. None of Lord St. Moritz's party seemed thoroughly satisfied with the day's results. Prance regretted an element of

caution in his nature that, except to the amount of a half-crown lottery, prevented his speculating at all. Lady Mary—whose information came direct from a great personage—always good-natured and generally right—was tortured by self-reproach because she had not ventured her whole yearly income, instead of half. Paravant, with some reason, seemed downhearted, and even sulky; while the rest experienced that sense of void and weariness which waits on all excitement involving no bodily risk, but, strangely enough, never affects those who come out of actual danger, either deliberately encountered or undergone by chance. Perhaps the least dissatisfied person in company was the butler, courteously offering champagne, who had backed Vermuth for this very event at no worse a price than twelve to one eight months ago, on information he could trust. “Never meant to ’edge,” as he told his club; “never *did* ’edge; and

landed one 'undred and twenty *cooter* as easy as changing a plate !”

What had his lordship done ? everybody asked in common courtesy. Nobody waited for his answer, nor did he volunteer information, for St. Moritz was engrossed with other ventures, in which he hoped by skill, daring, and patience to come off a winner.

The conversation dragged. Lady Mary cruelly snubbed the poor Molecatcher, and altogether shut him up. Then she tried a passage of arms with Paravant, who retorted so fiercely that she shrank back into her shell, and the whole party looked at each other in dismay. His wife could have told her ladyship “Forward James” was “as cross as two sticks,” having gauged his temper most unsatisfactorily, while he was dressing for dinner.

Flushed with success on the previous day, he had offered her a share of his winnings ; to do him justice, Paravant's liberality, like his

good-humour, was in the ascendant when things went right, and Beltenebrosa accepted gladly, making rapid mental calculations, the while money seemed very easy to get on a race-course. A hundred pounds, she observed, rose to five in a couple of minutes, for those who invested judiciously on the speed of a horse. More than one admirer had already confided his discovery of "a good thing," and offered, in appropriate jargon, "to put her on what she pleased." Oh! if she might only win five hundred pounds—not all at once, such a piece of luck could hardly be expected, but by a succession of judicious ventures on the soundest advice, count it out in bank-notes, pack it up in a registered letter, and send it off to Mervyn Strange, at the old church where she was married! What a relief it would be to get rid of a debt that so weighed on her conscience! She would rather have a millstone hanging round her neck!

Paravant was tying white cambric round his own—an operation in which it irritates a man to be interrupted—when she entered his dressing-room, with a meek reminder of his promise, and an offhand request for a hundred pounds then and there.

“I can lock it up in my travelling-bag,” said she. “It’s as safe with me as with you.” She had never seen him look so savage.

“A hundred devils!” he exclaimed. “You must be mad. Where the —— do you suppose it’s to come from? This is the worst day I ever had in my life, and you walk in asking for money, as if there was nothing to do but turn the tap on, and draw it like beer!”

She was not the least frightened, only scornful and disgusted; passing the glass-doors of the wardrobe in her own room, she could not help glancing at the beautiful woman reflected therein, and wondering, rather bitterly, if any man *but* a husband could have been so

rude and unfeeling, all for a miserable hundred pounds!

The weather turned colder. There was some question of ordering fires, and the evening set in wet. Slugs and snails came out in the garden, but the ladies remained indoors. Paravant was all for another bottle of claret—the rest seemed inclined to help him. A magnum of the best made its appearance; they began to talk about racing, and sat so long, that ere the men entered the drawing-room the ladies were yawning in separate corners, and it was past twelve o'clock.

But when his lordship gave Beltenebrosa her candle, she thanked him with such a look in the deep dark eyes as thrilled even his world-worn heart—so stimulating his natural urbanity and good-fellowship, that Paravant, in spite of ill-humour, could not but acknowledge the social merits of his host, confiding to Prance, as they left the smoking-room, that he

considered St. Moritz the pick of the Upper House. "None of your half-and-half chaps, but a real downright trump. A man a fellow could depend upon all round!"

The Molecatcher, dying to go to bed, expressed a cordial assent, and gladly wished him good-night.

But a new day brought cheering sunshine, restored spirits, more wagers, more dresses, more hopes. Beltenebrosa, refreshed by sleep, came down to breakfast looking even handsomer than usual, in a pale yellow garment of clear delicate tint, that set off her white skin and black hair to the greatest advantage. "Like an early primrose," said Prance, in a vein of poetry. "Or a firkin of butter," added Lady Mary, in less pathetic prose.

"I am glad *you* think it pretty," whispered the wearer to Lord St. Moritz, who approved cordially, with just such a stress on the personal pronoun as might either mean a mere

compliment to his taste, or an assurance that she desired no other admiration, and dressed for him alone.

He accepted it in the sense most pleasing to his vanity; and they proceeded to the Heath, with a consciousness on both sides of that mutual understanding, which is so delightful, so dangerous, and so impossible to preserve for more than about a week!

I believe there is no such happy time for two individuals as the first dawning of an admiration which circumstances may or may not foster into attachment hereafter. They are pleased to meet, but do not break their hearts if kept apart. The sense of proprietorship is not yet strong enough to warrant jealousy, and while much may be hoped from the future, the past has nothing to regret.

There seems a joyous freshness in the gift or acceptance of a flower for the first time, that subsequent lockets and bracelets can never recall, nor even the solemn investment of an

“engaged - ring.” And believe me, young ladies who are still “in maiden meditation fancy free,” who take your partners as they come “without partiality, favour, or affection,” giving them dances, round and square, in due succession, you should make the most of this your first season, for you will never have so much fun in another ; and though *happiness* may be snatched by fits and starts, there is no such thing left as *comfort* when once you begin watching the door !

Lord St. Moritz lost no time in cementing the dreamy fabric he had been at considerable pains to rear. They had hardly entered the enclosure before he offered Beltenebrosa his race-card, entreating her to select the odd number against the even, for the smallest wager—a pencil-case, a pair of gloves, one of the flowers she wore at her breast—anything, however trifling, because at *this* game it was not allowable to play for love !

She coloured ; she hesitated. “Oh, Lord

St. Moritz!" she said, "I don't know how; I never made a bet in my life."

"That is why I want you to make a bet with *me*. I should like to be associated in your mind with your first lesson in anything—good or bad. Perhaps you think the stakes too low. Make them what you choose—a kind word, a smile, a friendly thought: that's as good as a thousand to *me*!"

She pondered a moment, and answered gravely: "No; if I make a bet it shall not be a sham one. Flowers, and gloves, and trinkets are all very well; but I *should* like, once in my life, to win a *real* wager on a *real* horse."

"So you shall!" he exclaimed heartily. "I know what ought to be a certainty for the Ladies' Plate. I'll find out if it's all right from the trainer, and put you on if I can get a decent price—say five-to-one."

"I don't quite understand."

“If he wins you will get five pounds, and if he loses you pay one.”

“Capital! Why don't people always bet like that?”

“You must ask Paravant,” he replied laughing; yet a little disposed to doubt in how far this ignorance might be assumed.

“He wouldn't explain. He never tells me anything about his racing affairs. I don't see why I should be more communicative. No; whether I win or lose, I shall play this, as you gentlemen say, ‘off my own bat.’”

“All right,” answered his lordship, perfectly satisfied, “then I'll go at once. How much will you have?”

“How much do you think? I want to win. Well—I should *like* to win a hundred pounds!”

He stared. This was rather more than he bargained for. He had expected ten, or perhaps even a ‘pony,’ and felt like a man out

hunting who comes sailing down to a fence that turns out more formidable than he thought. Never mind. The hounds were running, so to speak, and he must have it, whether or no!

“Then I’ll set about it at once,” said he; and Beltenebrosa, whose eyes had begun to follow him about a good deal of late, saw the white hat bend confidentially to a small man in gaiters, and a smaller in an overcoat, ere it was lost amongst other hats of every description in the whirlpool of the betting-ring.

“How are you, my dear Miss Bell? How d’ye *do*? Who’d have thought of our meeting here? And you’re looking so well—I am indeed delighted!”

She wasn’t. After respectful bows and admiring glances from the highest in the land, beginning at the very top, it was indeed a come-down to be thus accosted by Mr. Delapré, manager of the Nonsuch Theatre, over-gloved, over-hatted, over-dressed, and over-presuming.

She stared as if trying to recall his name, bowed coldly, and rising from her chair, put her arm in Lord St. Moritz's, who returned at the moment, observing with considerable "intention": "This place gets so crowded—that's the worst of the last day! They let in all sorts of people without tickets. Let us take a turn on the course!"

Mr. Delapré was furious, not without reason, having passed into this exclusive paradise under a legitimate permit, that had cost him no less a price than the acceptance of an unsuccessful farce, an introduction to a rising actress, and the singing in suffocating smoking-rooms of more than one comic song.

"*Adieu* then, Mrs. Bell," said he, with a stage bow and a stage sneer. "Or rather, *au revoir*, for we shall meet again;" and so made his exit, dramatically enough—head up, chest thrown forward, nostrils expanded, breathing high disdain, and war to the knife.

“Who the deuce is that?” asked Lord St. Moritz. “And why does he call you Mrs. Bell?”

“Takes me for somebody else,” was her answer. “I wonder if I ought to be flattered? Now tell me: what have you done, and how much are we going to win?”

He entered on a long explanation that she did not quite understand. How he had seen the trainer of Abigail, and her jockey, and one of her two owners; how she had given her year to this horse, and three pounds to that, meeting them to-day at even weights; how it was exactly her distance; she looked as fine as a star, she seemed as fit as a fiddle, the talents were very sweet on her. Little Bumptious was *up*, and she carried a pot of money for the stable. All Greek to his listener, till assured that he had himself backed the mare for a hundred at four to one, and the “Signora” should stand in with him “a pony” on her

own account, if she liked. But while his lordship thus detailed his transactions, that restless spirit of his was busy with the dialogue he had arrived in time to overhear. His knowledge of the world suggested there had always been some mystery in Beltenebrosa's account of herself before she married Paravant. About the latter could be no uncertainty whatever; West Country magnates of sporting tastes vouched for his reality; and, indeed, he carried "squire" written in every line of his sturdy person, his healthy sun-burned face. But as to this "dark ladye," whom his lordship had taken up for the distraction of an idle hour, to find an exceedingly disturbing element in his everyday life. Who was she? What was she? A foreigner could never speak our language so well, there was no more trace of accent in her pronunciation than his own, and yet an Englishwoman was seldom so skilled in the little feints, passes, and parries, of those

skirmishes he loved to venture, preludes to a real attack, or, joining battle with a formidable adversary, could take such good care of herself the while.

“If she is really an adventuress,” thought St. Moritz, “and has cozened this joskin to marry her, with every intention of throwing him over at her convenience, why it simplifies the whole thing, and I am not sure I like her one bit the worse !”

In the meantime, a bell rings, a flag drops ; then comes a flutter of silk over the crowded heads, the crack of whips is heard through a dull beat of horses’ hoofs and deafening roar of men’s voices. A number goes up ; a popular baronet, never afraid of “plunging,” is congratulated. Somebody throws his hat in the air, and Lord St. Moritz takes a note-case from his pocket, quietly observing :

“I knew Abigail could pull it off. My only doubt was her being *meant*.”

He has not served a long apprenticeship without discovering that ladies like to touch their winnings—it gives such a sense of reality and substance. So he counts ten flimsy scraps of crumpled paper into Beltenebrosa's hand, to be rewarded by the sweetest of smiles, and a sigh of deep unutterable relief.

She never thinks of asking where they come from, and is not experienced enough to reflect that Lord St. Moritz cannot yet have been paid his winnings, and may possibly have offered her more than her share of a venture in which he was determined she should not be a loser. No, she is too much delighted with her success, and does not choose to see that she has taken the first downward step that compromises a woman in the eyes of her warmest admirer, and affords the vassal a claim he will hereafter put forward as entitling him to the privileges of a lord.

Yet is she conscious, while they leave the course to go home, that his lordship offers his arm with a certain air of proprietorship, and that already there is a slight and subtle difference in his manner, which she *feels* rather than *detects*.

Therefore does she decline the proffered escort, and transfers him to Lady Mary, with a gentle reminder of his duties as a host, confides herself to the delighted Prance instead, and is glad she did so within the next two minutes, while they thread a shifting crowd beginning to leave the course.

The Molecatcher and his charge, being the last couple, are so far isolated from their party that a hundred persons crowd between. Nance, acting under instructions, advances, with winning gipsy-smiles, offering to tell the fortune of "the dark lady and the handsome gentleman with beautiful blue eyes, one or both, my dears, for a little lily shilling, because

your star is the same, and such a pair was never made to part !”

Prance, much elated, produces half-a-crown, which the gipsy pockets, but passes behind him to whisper with his companion.

“ Sister,” she hisses in the other’s ear, “ do you value your life ?”

Beltenebrosa looks blankly in her face, feeling as if her very heart had stopped.

“ It’s doomed,” continues Nance. “ It’s got to be taken anywheres, and anyhow, and at any time. But I can save you, I *swear* I can; only you must let me see you before dark to-night.”

“ Where ?” gasps the listener, powerless to utter another syllable.

“ You needn’t take a long walk. Bless ye, I know—we all know. *You* be at the end of the garden—before dark, mind ! Oh sister, sister ! it’s a life-and-death job, this is !” Then changing her tone, for the Molecatcher’s

edification, she continues, in the true vagabond whine :

“But you’ll cross the poor gipsy’s hand with a bit of white money, beautiful lady. The gipsy couldn’t ask for less, and there’s gentlemen not far off—there’s one at your elbow now—as would think a look of them dark eyes of your’n was worth more than gold !”

With which characteristic assertion, enhanced by many becks and nods and wreathed smiles, for his special benefit, the fortune-teller vanishes from Prance’s sight, leaving him much impressed with her picturesque head-dress, mysterious knowledge, and personal charms.

“These — hum — these gipsies seem to understand things, Madame Paravant,” says the Molecatcher, feeling his way, as it were, to a ten-minutes’ flirtation during their walk. “That girl, now, eh ? she described your eyes exactly, and all that. What she said about your elbow and *me*, you know, was so true. I wonder how they find out ?”

She is looking straight before her, lost in thought. A delightful possibility deludes the too susceptible Molecatcher, that the gipsy's words may have opened the eyes of this beautiful woman to his adoration, which must henceforth be graciously accepted as ordained by fate. Alas, that he is so soon to be undeceived !

“ I beg your pardon, Mr. Prance,” says she, looking as if her thoughts and feelings are concentrated on some object a hundred miles away. “ I am afraid I did not hear. I have got such a headache, I can neither speak nor see. I don't want to talk, please. I'd rather you didn't say a word to me till we get back.”

“ It's always the same ! ” thinks Prance. “ I never get what I call a chance with a really nice woman, but something happens to bowl me out. That's just my luck. She wouldn't have had a headache if it had been anybody else ! ”

CHAPTER XXXI.

PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

MR. DELAPRÉ, leaving the enclosure after his rebuff, in a frame of mind most unfriendly to this audacious and unaccountable Mrs. Bell, was accosted by a slender, handsome young fellow, with dark eyes and white teeth, who seemed to have watched him for some time, awaiting his approach.

“Beg your pardon, sir,” said he, civilly. “Could I speak a few words with you? No offence, I hope. All fair and square.”

The actor, disposed to study character in all ranks, assented freely enough, first taking care to button his coat over the watch and money in his pockets.

“You’re a gentleman,” continued the other, “and I’m only a poor chap—nothing more than a gipsy, your honour—of the old blood, though. If it’s not a liberty, you and me can help each other.”

To professional eyes the man was a study. His loose attire, his slouched hat, his knotted red handkerchief, his easy bearing, and the graceful carriage of his head, were so many details, to be appropriated and reproduced with artistic finish at a future time.

Mr. Delapré unconsciously caught the gipsy’s tone and manner, while he replied :

“What’s up, mate ? And what d’ye mean ? Give it mouth, for I’m all in the dark myself.”

The other stared. “Look here, your honour,” said he. “You and me is both on the same lay ; but stow patter, there’s too many here that understands it, and high English is good enough for us. That lady in the Enclosure—her with the dark hair.”

“What of her?”

“I knew it! I said so! That’s right enough, isn’t it? And we want to take her down a peg or two—don’t us?”

“Go on, my good fellow. You haven’t made such a bad guess. How are we to set about it?”

“It’s a hand I dursn’t play without a partner,” answered the gipsy. “I know well enough where she is, but I must get speech of her to work the thing as it *should* be worked. You’re a gentleman, you are. If so be as you could help me to a suit of gentleman’s clothes, I’d undertake to see her myself, find out what she’s at, and put such a spoke in her wheel, as would knock *her* little game to shivers before the week’s out.”

Mr. Delapré pondered. The idea, perhaps because of its very extravagance, was after his own heart. Here seemed promise of adventures, dressings-up, surprises, situations,

possible scandal, and eventual notoriety for himself.

He glanced at the gipsy's figure. The man was about his own height, though of slighter build, with well-shaped hands and feet. A happy thought struck him—daring, dramatic, worthy of his genius and histrionic powers.

“If I knew where to borrow other clothes,” said he, “you should have mine; or if you could lend me a clean shirt, we might exchange for an hour or two.”

“You wouldn't mind teaching me a little fortune-telling, I daresay, and a few tricks of the trade.”

The gipsy's eyes sparkled. “You're a real gentleman,” he exclaimed; “a nobleman, a prince! You ought to have been a Romany. If you will come across to that tent there, under a yellow flag, perhaps you'll find I have cleaner shirts than you thought for. You're welcome to the best, brother. You've

promised help to Jericho Lee the first time of asking—that's good enough for *him!*"

"I can trust you?" said Mr. Delapré, who, though a bold fellow enough, had not quite taken leave of his senses. "I want to do you a good turn, and there's honour among—well, among all professions!"

"Look ye here," answered the gipsy; "I have said 'brother.' When Jericho Lee says 'brother,' you couldn't be safer among the Romanies not if you was the duke of a tribe. There's no call for me to swear it—but *there!*"

With that he crossed his fore-fingers and spat over them on the ground, obviously attaching some mysterious importance to this unsophisticated formula.

The manager watched him attentively, pondering the while how so uncleanly a rite was to be modified for a polite audience in stalls and boxes.

Perhaps to Mr. Delapré the most enjoyable part of the whole day's pleasure-seeking was his visit at the gipsy's tent. It seemed altogether so fresh a scene, so novel an experience, affording a mine of treasure for future use and adaptation at the reopening of his theatre next week.

Every man likes to exercise an art in which he excels; and the unfeigned wonder betrayed by Jericho at his skill in "making-up" afforded him much satisfaction. In a few magical touches from a piece of common chalk, the loan of a neighbouring acrobat, by a pull here, a twitch there, and the application of some candle-snuff to his own eyebrows and eyelashes, he succeeded with astonishing promptitude in changing exteriors with his swarthy confederate, turning the latter into a very respectable imitation of a modern young gentleman as seen in hot weather on a race-course, while he came out so strong himself,

in Jericho's clothes and the gipsy character, as at the first glance to deceive even Nance, who, during the space of a full minute, took him for a former lover, long since convicted of various felonies and undergoing penal servitude for life.

In the meantime, Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, had arrived at the *Bijou* fatigued in body and much exercised in mind as to how she could grant her gipsy ladies'-maid an interview unobserved by the rest of the party.

Here she was favoured by fortune, or rather by that injudicious consideration which society shows to an attachment, good or bad, so long as it is yet in the bud and has not lost its interest by becoming public property.

Tea was laid in the library, a pretty little room opening on a conservatory, hung with sketches in water-colours, and containing some fifty or sixty volumes, mostly French novels,

whence, after half-a-cup each, the company departed, as if purposely, one by one.

Lady Mary had letters to write. "Really, with all this gaiety, one quite neglected one's duties in life! There was a time for all things, and she must answer seven invitations before the post went out!" Prance wanted to finish "*Milor et Miladi*," a story of the very worst French kind, purporting to represent aristocratic English life, and relying for interest on the breaking of every commandment in the Decalogue, which improving work he carried off to his bedchamber. One wished to see the chickens, another the pigs, and in ten minutes not a soul was left but Lord St. Moritz and Beltenebrosa.

Neither spoke till the last footstep died away, the last door slammed. Then his lordship moved across the room to where she was sitting, and bent over her with an air of chivalrous devotion that used to make

Mrs. Stripwell laugh, but had been very effective with Lady Goneril.

“You look pale,” said he, “my dear signora. You are tired. You have been doing too much, or something has happened to put you out. What is it? Won’t you confide in me?”

Her answer was little to the purpose, consisting indeed of another question.

“Where is Mr. Paravant?”

She called him Mr. Paravant in conversation with Lord St. Moritz, who perhaps drew his own conclusions from this formal appellation.

“Oh! Paravant,” answered her host, “he’s gone to the kennels, and won’t tear himself from Her Majesty’s hounds for the next two hours. He’s safe till dinner-time.”

Then the coast was clear, but for Lord St. Moritz! If he could only have had letters to write, French novels to read, or pigs and

poultry to visit! How to get rid of her host puzzled her exceedingly.

He watched the troubled looks on that beautiful face with no little triumph, attributing her uneasiness solely to his own admirable qualities.

“Lord St. Moritz,” said she, after a pause, in the frank winning tone it was so impossible to resist, “I may say anything I like to *you*, mayn’t I—and you won’t take it amiss?”

“Anything!” he repeated, plumping down on the sofa by her side.

She rose on the instant, as if they were playing see-saw; and, vexed as he felt, there seemed something so ludicrous in this compensatory oscillation, he couldn’t help laughing outright.

“You’re always good-humoured,” she continued sweetly, “and you’re always *nice*. I’m sure I’ve reason to say so. Now don’t you think, if you and I are left here together on

purpose—you know, like this—people will *talk*, and that's so disagreeable for both of us, and so—so dangerous for *me*? You're not angry, *are you*?"

What could he do? What would the Don himself have done? Even that worst of bad boys must have acceded to Zerlina's wishes, so lovingly put and so frankly expressed. Besides, was she not, as it were, mortgaging the future for this present immunity from calumnious remark? She admitted a mutual tie, a common interest. She could not repudiate these hereafter, when time and opportunity might serve him better than now.

Half-vexed, half-gratified, Lord St. Moritz went to join the pig and poultry fanciers, leaving Beltenebrosa free to follow her own devices till it was time to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BLACK-MAIL.

WHAT a long five minutes it seemed, and how that heart of hers beat, though she prided herself on having it under strict control. She had resolved not to stir till the hand of a little fancy clock reached the quarter. She listened to make sure it had not stopped, feeling, as we all do at such moments, how lagging can be the pace of time. Like Mazeppa, stiff and smarting in his bonds, longing so wearily, after his wild night-ride, for the rising of the sun.

How slow, alas, he came !
Methought that mist of dawning gray
Would never dapple into day ;
How heavily it rolled away
Before the eastern ame.

But the pretty gimcrack chimed at last, so, passing to the lawn, she threaded the shrubberies with swift and noiseless step, to reach the limits of the garden unobserved.

A sunk fence separated dressed ground from hay-fields. Even as she reached its brink, out of the ditch sprang, not Nance as she expected, but a well-dressed rakish figure, that she recognised, nevertheless, at the first glance, for Jericho Lee.

Instinctively she made sure there was no weapon in his hand, and, gaining confidence, confronted him steadily enough, pale indeed, and with parted lips, but eager watchful eyes that never left his own.

“Where is Nance?” she asked haughtily, after a pause of painful suspense. “Why did you come instead?”

“To see with my own eyes,” he answered, “and hear with my own ears, and learn for myself what excuse I can make

for my sister to them as 'put me on the job.' ”

“Speak lower,” she urged, with the duplicity of self-preservation. “Half-a-dozen gentlemen, and all the men-servants, are within call.”

He glanced round wary and watchful, moving eye and ear like some forest beast. “That is why I changed my Romany rags,” said he. “In such Sunday clothes as these, sister, the Gorgios would take me for one of themselves. But I have little time to spare, and them as sent me isn't very patient of waiting. My orders was to make an end of it and be back before dark.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, with all her apprehensions returning. “I need only cry out and a dozen hands would be on your throat before you could move a finger, but I don't want to hurt you, Jericho.”

It was a game of brag. He could not tell

what assistance she might be able to command, but the conciliatory tone in which she pronounced his name restored confidence, and he laughed in scorn.

“I might do it with a turn of the wrist,” said he, “before the best of them could run a hundred yards. But I want to spare my sister, if I may. I came here to-night in goodwill. The gipsies are like their neighbours, for that matter; they’re willing to take blood-money as the price of blood!”

“How much?”

She had the day’s winnings in her pocket, but, notwithstanding her fears, was disposed to make the best bargain she could.

“It wouldn’t be less than a bank-note,” said he. “Look at them silks and satins, look at them jewels on your throat and in your ears; watch and chain, too, and rings, I’ll warrant, under them gloves. You wouldn’t say that twenty was too much?—and ten

more for poor Jericho?" he added, observing less surprise than he expected on the proud set face. "In course I'll engage to free you, sister; this here ain't to be brought up again."

Voices were heard about the house, there was no time to lose, and pressing three ten-pound notes into his willing hand, she entreated him to vanish at once, for her sake and his own.

But Jericho, feeling safe enough in his disguise, so soon as he struck a public path that crossed the fields, swaggered slowly off to join a gipsy-looking person who was waiting for him at the nearest stile.

"I never saw anything better done," said the latter. "The make-up is capital, and you've caught the whole trick of it without a rehearsal. You ought to have been an actor."

The gipsy, looking roguishly at Mr. Delapré, answered with a wink, reflecting possibly that,

after all, it might need a cleverer fellow to prosper in his own precarious walk of life.

For a while Beltenebrosa, in the sanctuary of her apartment, felt a load had been lifted from her breast. But the relief was not for many minutes. She soon reflected that a demand so readily granted would be repeated on the first opportunity, and that Jericho's assurances of immunity might be trusted so long as her thirty pounds lasted him, and not a moment longer.

With a heavy heart she began to sleek her black locks, feeling so dispirited as to avoid even the companionship of her maid. While thus occupied, her husband came into the room, after a prolonged inspection of Her Majesty's hounds in the yards and lodging-houses of the Royal Kennels. At any other time such a visit would have been recapitulated and dwelt on with much interest and no little prolixity. To-day, huntsmen, whips,

feeder, distemper, drafts, boilers, troughs, and benches seemed obliterated by some more recent excitement, the details of which he proceeded to recount forthwith.

“Don’t be frightened, Dragon,” he began good-naturedly. In his best humour he sometimes called her by the abbreviative of “Bel,” facetiously changed to the Dragon. “Don’t be frightened, for I’ll take care he shan’t molest us; but I saw one of those d——d gipsy cousins of yours as I walked home by the fields just now. I spotted the beggar by his red scarf and battered white hat. I’m sure he was hanging about here for no good.”

This description certainly did not apply to Jericho, disguised as a fine gentleman, and although she considered it likely enough that in case of violence he had a comrade within call, she thought well to profess more apprehension than she felt.

“Good gracious!” she exclaimed, laying down the hair-brushes. “How disagreeable! How terrifying! They have found me out! They’re going to hunt me down!”

“Not if I know it, Bel,” he answered kindly. “You’ve had quite enough of them, in my opinion, and paid much too high a price for a week’s lark among your kinsfolk. You’re not to be bothered any more. *I’ll* take care of that! I’m rather glad now we’re going to clear out of this to-morrow.”

“So am I; it does me good to hear you say it.”

“Are you? I was afraid this kind of life—all this dressing, and dawdling, and flirting, and showing off, suited you down to the ground.”

She was longing for rest; the excitement of the last few days, culminating in her late interview, had been too much.

“I’m tired of it all,” she said, “it’s the

same thing over and over again. I should like to go to bed for a month !”

“Ah ! Combe-Wester, in my dear old mother’s room, looking out on the Appleton-Cleves, with the purple moors against the sky—I couldn’t help thinking of them to-day coming back across the Heath. Ah, there’s no heather like ours down in the West. I wish I was there now.”

“I’d no idea you were so poetical.”

“Nobody ever told me that before. But there are some things every fellow feels, you know, and then one fellow puts them in a book and gets the credit. I’m a rough sort of chap—too rough, I often think, for such a handsome, graceful creature, Bel, as you ; but I know what I like, though I can’t always say what I mean !”

“You said *that* very prettily. When we get back to London to-morrow, we’ll pack up and pay the bills. Now go and dress at once

like a good boy, or we shall both be late again."

The packing up, notwithstanding an extensive wardrobe, seemed feasible enough, and even the payment of an interminable hotel bill was to be achieved by further inroads on capital, already broken into for the exigencies of settling-day at Tattersall's; but after these practical difficulties had been overcome, there were yet many obstacles, freely cursed by Paravant, in the way of an early departure to his Somersetshire home.

When Gulliver woke to find himself tied down by the little people during his nap, though he could have broken each single thread with a finger, their aggregate force held him like an iron chain; and it is a well-known fact that the whole weight of a horse can be suspended by the combined resistance of all the hairs in his tail!

So when we would cut ourselves adrift

from London life, we are checked at every turn by impediments, trifling in themselves, but irresistible, in the numbers constituting their strength.

Have we not all echoed the paradox of that great wit and statesman who observed, "How pleasant life would be if it wasn't for its pleasures!" And is there one of us who has not rebelled secretly in his heart, if not openly to his wife, against the infliction of some so-called amusement which he would have exchanged, only too willingly, for a couple of hours' healthy exercise on the treadmill? It was all very well to say, "Let us be off to Somersetshire at once," and to boast that *The Flying Dutchman* would deliver him at his own door in less than six hours; but Paravant was no more a free agent than you, or me, or the Lord Chancellor, or the Sultan, or the Shah of Persia, or any other married man.

To begin with, there were coming dinners

a fortnight deep and more, for people take long shots at us in these days, and a friend of mine lately excused himself from a six-weeks' invitation, by pleading a previous engagement contracted *the year before!* Then there was a breakfast they ought not to miss at Hampton House, and a ball at the Duchess's (to meet royalty), and Beltenebrosa must hear the new opera, and Paravant, though vexed he had not been asked to play, would like to see a match at Lord's, between All-England and twenty-two of his own county, besides certain suburban race-meetings and water-parties on the river, both up and down. Altogether, it seemed exceedingly difficult to get away, and departure might have been postponed till the House was up, but for the persistency of Lord St. Moritz, who, after their memorable Ascot week, began to observe less caution than seemed discreet in his relations with Beltenebrosa.

He had discovered something of her

previous history, and showed little generosity in his repeated hints and unpleasant allusions to an advantage thus gained by chance.

Returning from the poultry-yard at the *Bijou*, he happened to catch sight of Jericho's figure, as the gipsy swaggered across a hay-field in his borrowed clothes. Something in the gait and bearing attracted his lordship's attention, and he experienced a certain vague consciousness of having seen that coat and hat and strutting step before; though he knew Mr. Delapré well enough on, and slightly off the stage, he failed to recognise the actor in a place where he so little expected to see him as the Enclosure at Ascot; but, oddly enough, the caricature of the man brought to his mind a haunting resemblance of somebody he ought to remember, more forcibly than the man himself. This puzzle occupied him all dinner, but at dessert its solution came across him like a flash. "I have it!" he exclaimed, looking

down the table to Beltenebrosa with inexcusable want of tact. "That fellow who thought he knew you to-day was Mr. Delapré, manager of the Nonsuch Theatre. He must have seen you in London!" She never blushed, it was not her way, and perhaps only Lady Mary remarked her cheek turn a shade paler, while she answered, coolly enough, "Very likely. London is a large place, but there's a great deal in it better worth seeing than *me!*"

She thought it clumsy of his lordship, nevertheless, and St. Moritz himself felt ashamed of his blunder. Wondering why he couldn't hold his tongue!

Returning to town, he lost no time in calling on Mr. Delapré, who received him, we may be sure, none the less cordially because of his rank, and volunteered all the information he could supply on the subject, putting no too favourable construction on the antecedents of a lady who had rejected his over-

tures in Richmond Park, and snubbed him so cruelly on Ascot race-course.

Lord St. Moritz was at a loss, doubtful whether he ought to be pleased or provoked. This haughty dame should unquestionably have been an easier prize, and yet its very difficulties created the chief incentive to his pursuit.

In the meantime, Beltenebrosa, harassed, fatigued, perhaps a little *bored* in those exalted circles she had so desired to attain, and exceedingly uncomfortable at the idea of being hunted by her swarthy kinsfolk, began to treat her husband with increased kindness, such as caused him to feel in love with her once more. "Forward James," though anything but brilliant, was gifted with a certain self-sustaining cunning, kindly furnished by nature for the assistance of ruder intellects, which useful faculty his late experiences of turf probity and London life in general had done much

to sharpen and expand. He was fond of proclaiming that he "wasn't as big a fool as he looked." And it *did* strike him, after such reflection as he was capable of bringing to bear on the subject, that the visits of Lord St. Moritz were more frequent than their intimacy warranted, his attentions to Madame Paravant, *née* Beltenebrosa, more marked, his manner more familiar, than was either customary or agreeable.

In short, he grew suspicious, jealous, watchful, and thoroughly unmanageable, becoming day by day a more troublesome escort abroad, a less tolerable companion at home.

Now, it was one thing to flourish about London where and how she liked, with a pleasant nobleman in attendance, while a husband, who asked no questions, was ready to bring her here and fetch her there, coming or going, or staying away altogether, at her convenience ; and another, to be followed about

and haunted by a clumsy, uncompromising guardian, who never left her side for a moment, and made himself exceedingly unpleasant, even in that happy situation !

Before a month was out, Beltenebrosa seemed only too glad to get away ; and although she did manage a private leave-taking with Lord St. Moritz, sweetened by many promises to think, and write, and remember, I fancy this romantic interview was much less affectionate than he had taught himself to expect.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES.

“THEY’VE come home, after all, Mr. Tregarthen. I must say I never thought he would have the face to bring her back here !”

Dinner was over at the Rectory. Dessert and port-wine were on the table, and the handy parlourmaid, who could shut a door without *banging* it, had retired, leaving master and mistress to the process of digestion undisturbed.

It was the hour which man, always more or less a materialist, loves to pass in tranquillity, but which woman, industrious, energetic, irrepressible, too often profanes by introduction of uncomfortable subjects, family

troubles, domestic grievances, and difficulties of a like nature, better encountered in the middle of the day.

“Didn’t you?” murmured the rector, sipping port in defiance of lumbago.

“Didn’t I *what*? That’s no answer, Silas. I say I never thought he would have dared to come here, nor that impudent minx neither.”

“My dear, where would you have them live, but at their own home?”

“Where? Anywhere. It’s an insult, an outrage—flying in the face of the county, I call it. Surely you don’t mean we ought to call on them!”

“That’s as you please, Selina. You know I leave all these matters to your own good sense. I should be sorry to break with my old pupil, too, especially as I think a little friendly advice would do him no harm. The Combe-Wester property is not large. James

was always free about money, and I fear he is burning the candle at both ends."

"How do you know? You never told me a word."

"I only heard it to-day. He has done up the house, from attics to scullery, all spic-and-span — fresh painted and papered; a man down from London to new-furnish the drawing-room; more stabling at the back, and a conservatory thrown out from the library window. It will cost a fortune."

His wife pondered. She would like exceedingly to inspect these handsome alterations, not only for the indulgence of that curiosity which right-minded women feel in the dress, decoration, and general expenditure of their neighbours, but also that she might pronounce on them in circles where she was considered an authority.

She wished now she had volunteered her opinion less decidedly; but nobody could "talk

backwards" better than Mrs. Tregarthen, and she began to retract forthwith.

"It's natural they should have the best of everything," said she, ignoring the question of expense, as an inconvenient precedent. "Of course it's *her* doing, and she always had good taste, I must allow. Besides, I understand they kept the best company in London—lords and ladies by the bushel, and even greater people than that."

Mrs. Tregarthen nodded, with the air of one who was behind the scenes. Her husband nodded too, drowsily, as having dined freely and well.

"Very likely, my dear," he assented. "Difference in rank is less thought of than it used to be. The Marchioness lunched at Combe-Wester yesterday. She drove herself over in the donkey-cart."

"You're sure it was the Marchioness; not the Marquis? It makes all the difference, you

know. Of course a Lord-Lieutenant must be civil to everybody."

"Quite sure, Selina. The Marquis walked across to fetch her. The donkey stood still, and her ladyship was two hours getting there. The Marquis bade Giles cut one of my saplings in Ashwell to drive it home, and gave him a shilling."

"Which he spent in gin and cider, I'll be bound. That Giles wants a talking to, and he shall have it. You're too easy with them, Silas. It's lucky there's somebody who is not afraid to speak."

"It is, my dear. I don't care to be always finding fault. But about calling?"

"What do *you* think? Of course, if the county people visit them, I'm not going to be conspicuous by holding aloof. Perhaps, after all, it's a duty we owe to ourselves. Have you finished, Mr. Tregarthen? Then we'll go to the study and ring for tea."

“It’s very pretty, dear. I don’t wonder you like it!”—Thus Beltenebrosa, sauntering home to dress for dinner at the hour Mr. and Mrs. Tregarthen rose from table to spend the rest of their summer’s evening by lamp-light. “And how we’ve improved it, haven’t we? It’s not like the same place.”

Paravant—clad from top to toe in white flannel, with straw-hat, cricket-shoes, and a spud in his hand—growled rather a grudging assent. “It ought to look pretty spicy,” he observed; “these fancies of yours cost a pot of money, and Combe-Wester didn’t want to be much better when we began.”

He looked lovingly over his trim lawn to the low-lying meadow, dotted with lofty elms, intersected with thickets rather than hedges, brightened by a sleepy pike-fishing stream, that widened into broad gleaming pools at every bend, shut in by wooded hills, under a faint line of purple, where dusky moorlands

met the crimson and orange of sunset in a rich autumnal sky.

He was fond of his old home, and had spared no expense on its decoration, giving his orders with reckless liberality, as a man of taste and spirit; but such indulgences must be paid for, and the startling suspicion often came across him that, though he had made his house thoroughly livable, he could not afford to live in it after all!

She hated to touch on money matters, they reminded her of that galling debt still owing to Mervyn Strange. A millstone that had sunk her in deep waters—in betting transactions, pecuniary obligations, and compromising confidences with Lord St. Moritz—yet had not freed her from the liability she never could recall without a sense of painful humiliation, dashed by some strange sweet joy, of which she yet felt bitterly ashamed. A chapter on finance, too, rendered “Forward

James" cross and disagreeable for hours, but it was difficult to keep him off the topic, and caustic St. Moritz described his character with no little accuracy, when he declared "Paravant ought to be called Paradox! He's the most reckless fellow alive in pounds, but always seems to be haunted by the ghost of a shilling."

That spectre was hovering about him now, floating on the shafts of golden lustre that flooded the valley, darkening the glories of a setting sun, dipping behind the level of the moor.

"We are going too fast, Bel," said he, digging viciously with his spud at a weed in the gravel-walk. "Something must be done. I can't live the pace, and that's all about it!"

"I thought you won at Newmarket. You told me so when you came back."

"A drop in the ocean, my dear. Not enough for the plumber's bill! Look here,

Bel, everything's got to be paid up outside the house. The upholsterer will wait, and so will the builder, but day-labourers can't do without their wages, and that terrace of yours keeps as many spades going as a new railway!"

"Stop it, then. It looks very nice as it is!"

"And put it in everybody's head that I'm so hard up I can't even go on with my improvements—that *would* be a wise plan! Better advertise one's insolvency in *The Western Luminary* at once. Every tradesman would send in his bill as soon as he could make it out. No, no, Bel, I have a better plan than that."

"What is it?"

"You remember Swansdown Races?"

"I am not likely to forget them, nor my ride on Potboy!"

"Game little Potboy! He did us a good

turn last year ; he will do us another this. The meeting is next week. We'll have a party for it—London people, real swells, fellows with lots of money, and not afraid to spend it ; your friend Lord St. Moritz, if you like !”

She started, but answered not a word.

“The little horse is at his best. I had a letter from my trainer yesterday. Nobody believes he can jump like a deer, and away again off the ground like a tennis-ball. He can't help winning the hurdle-race, if he's properly ridden, Bel ; I shall ride him myself !”

She drew to his side.

“But isn't it dangerous ?” she protested, with a solicitude that both pleased and flattered him exceedingly.

“Never you mind about *that*. I've pretty good nerves, and don't lose my head in a race, run it how they will. Of course, if a fellow's a muff, it's very easy to make a mess of

galloping over hurdles, and a fall is no joke on hard ground. But I'm not going to fall, not if I know it."

"And you'll take care?"

"Yes; *I'll* take care. There's only one of the others can make my horse gallop; that's Adonis, and I have found out that he's not *meant*. What with my weight, and being out of practice, and Potboy never having done anything in the jumping way, they will lay any odds you please, if I ride him myself; and I mean to go in for something worth winning this time, you see if I don't. I'm lighter than I look; I can waste quicker and easier than most people. We'll have St. Moritz down—you must manage that—and some more fellows who don't mind backing their opinions, particularly over my sixty-four claret; and it's very odd if I can't draw them for ponies, fifties, and even hundreds, at six and seven to one!"

“But are you quite sure you’ll win?”

“Nothing is *sure*, Bel, in this world, but death and taxes! Bar accidents, you know, and if the horse keeps right, it’s *good* enough; that’s all I can say!”

“But you could make a certainty of *losing*, couldn’t you?”

He gave a prolonged whistle, looking intensely amused; then bent his knees and doubled his arms in the attitude of a rider who pulls hard at his horse, while he observed:

“Certainly; it’s easy enough to put the strings on. Captain Armstrong generally has a pleasant and profitable mount!”

“I don’t know anything about Captain Armstrong. I never heard of such a person, and it’s nonsense talking about *strings*! But it *does* seem to me the wisest way would be to make lots of bets against your own horse and then lose on purpose.”

“Well done, Dragon!” he exclaimed,

laughing heartily. "Live and learn. You haven't been to Ascot for nothing. Yours is a capital plan, and I'm sorry to say it is very often carried out. There's only one objection. I can't take advantage of it and remain a gentleman."

"Why?"

"Because it's dishonest. That's all! I might as well pick a friend's pocket at once. Indeed, that wouldn't be so bad; for I should run the risk of imprisonment with hard labour. No, no! Bel. Hang it! We haven't got to *roping* yet!"

"I don't see why you may not make sure of winning a bet one way more than another. When that horse with the long name hurt himself in his box, and you heard about it first, you told me yourself you laid against him as if he were dead! I remember, because I thought it such a funny expression. And, again, after that beautiful creature, Amaranth,

was tried, and turned out not half so good as the ugly one, you betted ever so much against it, because you were quite certain it couldn't win. Now, where's the difference?"

But her question involved so long and comprehensive a disquisition on turf ethics, that when they reached the house it was not half concluded, nor, I may add, was Beltenebrosa half convinced.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

COMBE-WESTER IN FULL DRESS.

“A BUTLER and two footmen! *And* a boy, and—yes—another man out of livery. I declare it’s sinful, Mr. Tregarthen. I wish I hadn’t come!”

But here the rector’s excellent wife departed from the truth, having, indeed, looked forward to the present occasion—a large dinner-party at Combe-Wester—with a curiosity that it would have cost her infinite mortification to disappoint.

On Jane Lee’s first disappearance, more than a year ago, from her matronly charge, accompanied by a gentleman whom she termed “one’s own curate,” she placed the worst con-

struction on that young lady's character, pronouncing her no longer worthy to take a place in the virtuous phalanx of which she was herself so unsullied an ornament. It made matters no better to learn that Mervyn Strange had been jilted by his beautiful companion, and when the latter reappeared on the surface as the legal wife of "that oaf, James Paravant," to use Mrs. Tregarthen's forcible expression, her indignation knew no bounds. She gave her opinion freely enough, particularly to the rector, but modified it as we have seen, with ludicrous inconsistency, when she found the object of her disapproval admired and sought after by the whole neighbourhood. The Marchioness, whose word was law for thirty miles round, having "taken up" Beltenebrosa in London, resumed her intimacy when she returned home. The Marquis openly avowed his adoration, calling Mrs. Paravant the "Star of the West;" but as he was the

busiest, the most good-natured, and the least impressionable old gentleman, such an admission caused his wife no uneasiness, and her ladyship, thirty years younger than her husband, frank, handsome, and a *little* fast, came to tea or luncheon at Combe-Wester five days out of seven.

“The husband is a cub, my dear,” she wrote to her sister, at an Imperial Court; “but the wife is simply perfection—handsome, a little too dark, but so quiet, so graceful, and *such* good manners! No babies, no twaddle, no goody-goody, no airs and graces. I fancy she’s more than half a foreigner, though she speaks English as well as I do. She *might* have a temper, when roused; but she’s good-nature itself in every-day life. Sings too, like an angel, and I should think, if necessary, can be as plucky as something else. It’s such fun! The squiresses don’t know what to make of her, but the squires would die for her to a

man, and my lord is as bad as the rest. Write by the next mail," &c.

Thus befriended, it is not surprising Mrs. Tregarthen should have changed her mind concerning this black sheep, and called on the Paravants forthwith, not without hope of meeting the great lady there, to find nobody at home, receiving in return for this empty civility that invitation to dinner. She now protested she would rather have refused. Like many people who profess austerity of character, the rector's wife was much impressed by the pomps and vanities of a world that seemed less wicked when in full dress. She did not care to judge hastily of transgressors with two men in livery, but of those with two men *out* of livery, it seemed uncharitable to judge at all!

Entering the drawing-room in a conjugal fashion, unhappily obsolete—on her husband's arm—who had made himself extremely spruce,

and kept his gloves on, she was so bewildered by the unusual splendour of everything about her as scarcely to take note of the new furniture, and signally to fail in expressing, as she had intended, condescension, forgiveness, and assurance of continued protection, in her greeting to the hostess. That lady received her with a polite welcome, frank, dignified, perfectly cordial, but as completely "without consequence," to use a French expression, as if they had parted the day before.

Mrs. Tregarthen admitted subsequently that "turned loose with the others she felt as if she had dropped from the clouds." Only by a strong effort of *will*, did she make out that the Marchioness was not present, and, painfully conscious that among these smart London people she was sadly out of her element, she took refuge in a photograph-book and wished herself at home.

The rector, wisely attaching less import-

ance to company than good cheer, felt less uncomfortable. Everybody said Paravant had brought down an excellent cook. The sixty-four he knew by experience was undeniable, so he pulled off his gloves and waited the summons to dinner with composure and satisfaction.

It startled him not a little to hear that important meal announced in French, and to the lady of the house.

“*Madame, est servie,*” said a foreign domestic, with dark curls and earrings; whereupon Paravant stuck out his elbow, and marched off an Honourable Mrs. Somebody, whose husband was coming next day, while Beltenebrosa, with a tact and calmness that did her infinite credit, paired her couples so judiciously as to offend the pretensions of none, though she *did* whisper, following in their wake on the arm of Lord St. Moritz: “You must help me a little with the

country neighbours. You won't find them very light in hand."

Mrs. Tregarthen, immediately in front, overheard, and shook with indignation, but the dandy who conducted her was so large, so gorgeous, altogether so splendid and overpowering, that her spirit sank within her; she felt unequal to attack or defence.

It was a pleasant dandy, notwithstanding, and won her heart long before the fish was off the table. Joyous, good-humoured, and thoroughly unaffected, in spite of its elaborate get-up, frankly interested in her poor, her pigs, her kitchen-garden, her autumn roses, with obvious knowledge of these rural subjects, and professing to study the rearing of poultry almost as eagerly as thoroughbred stock. It drank a great deal of champagne, coming out more affable and amusing with every glass, so that Mrs. Tregarthen, completely fascinated, could not but admit the

flirtations with which she credited "fine London ladies," as she called them, to be less inexcusable than she had supposed.

Her husband, too, found himself well placed between his hostess, who attended sedulously to his bodily refreshment, and a very smart, very sprightly, not very young lady, of the modern fast school, whose maxim it was to "make things pleasant for everybody," and who, like all great experimentalists, lost no occasion of adding one more to her experiences in the discomfiture of mankind. With her bright eyes, white teeth, silvery laugh, and the "pretty woman's ways" she assumed as a matter of course, this incorrigible person, now in her seventh season, had long been a terror to devoted wives, and I admit, with regret, that the Reverend Silas so far became her victim as to find himself mentally comparing her charms with the ampler maturity of Mrs. Tregarthen, and

asking himself, thirty years too late, why he had married so young.

Altogether, the country neighbours seemed to get on very well without assistance from Lord St. Moritz, who found the more leisure to devote to his beautiful hostess.

Why was he here? She asked herself the question with mingled feelings of satisfaction, surprise, and a tinge of resentment towards Paravant. "How odd husbands are!" she thought; and where is the wife who has not occasion for the same remark many times a day? "If he believes St. Moritz makes up to me, he ought not to invite him. If he don't, why was there such a fuss in London? Why did he bring me at short notice down here? Poor James! He likes me, I believe, but he *is* so stupid! The other is clever enough, but I wonder if he *really* cares? Something between the two would be — perfection!"

His lordship, also, whirling down by the Flying Dutchman, with newspapers, novels, and cigarettes in profusion, to beguile his journey, had been considering the matter with an attention that he only brought to bear on such dangerous subjects as foolish attachments and dangerous intrigues. Like Horace, he plumed himself on having "militated not without glory," in unworthy warfare, and refused to admit that he was but a jaded epicure, who had frittered away, on forbidden delicacies, the health and appetite that ought to have served for the enjoyment of a wholesome repast. At twenty he could have loved one woman dearly, and been happy with her. At forty, he could love a great many women, passionately, and be happy with none of them. Face after face haunted him so persistently as to persuade him he had found anchorage at last for his roving heart; face after face palled and wearied in turn, none the slower because

of its natural frowns when supplanted at short notice by a successor. In his lordship's case there is no doubt the cynical aphorism held good that affirms "A man always believes his first love his last, and his last love his first."

Lady Goneril, with her incontestable beauty and strong affections, might have retained him longer had she not allowed him to perceive how necessary he was to her happiness. Mrs. Stripwell, again, a sufficiently heartless lady, with an excellent opinion of her own attractions, seemed likely to enjoy an uninterrupted reign in an empire of which, neither to herself nor others, would she admit the value. Lord St. Moritz not only admired her person, but professed to discover charms of mind to which other people, her own sex especially, were insensible. The truth is, she kept him in hot water. He could never be sure of her five minutes, however seriously he urged his suit.

It must be admitted that, with those rosy lips and white teeth, she looked best in merriment. So, when he was reproachful, she laughed; when he was sulky, she laughed; when he turned sentimental, and "went in for heroics," as she called it, again she laughed, loud and long, too, if he tried to extract romance from the situation. Altogether she must have been a most unsatisfactory idol, and but for the arrival of Beltenebrosa in London, and the veil of mystery that imparted to the new beauty a certain stimulating interest, might have remained, as far as I can tell, on her pedestal for years.

That she was utterly dethroned, nobody knew better than herself—except Lord St. Moritz. He was literally afraid to acknowledge the influence exercised over him by this dark handsome woman he was traveling many score of miles to visit in her own home.

And her husband? Hardened as was his lordship, professing untenable opinions on marriage and its obligations, such as society consents to tolerate if not to excuse, he had yet enough left of that loyalty which is the essence of a gentleman's whole character, to feel many qualms of repugnance in shaking a man by the hand, in accepting his hospitality and sitting at his table, against whom he meditated a treachery of the blackest dye. It was done every day, he reflected, but it went against the grain, nevertheless; so he persuaded himself, as people generally do when embarked on an expedition of which their better-selves disapprove, that he meant no harm after all!

Paravant could not feel cause for jealousy, or he would never have sent the invitation. To decline it would have looked churlish, and implied consciousness of offence, besides being uncourteous to the lady, with whom, besides,

there were many matters to talk over, involving discussion not of love, but of money. If she seemed happy, he would attend to swell her triumph; if sad, he must not be so unmanly as to desert her. Altogether he could not well have stayed away, and was glad he had made up his mind to come.

Alas, that his doubts and scruples, his wiser promptings, the reproaches and remonstrances of his nobler nature, were all lost in the magic of Beltenebrosa's flashing eyes, and that, meeting their glance, as she left the dining-room, while restoring a fan and handkerchief not quite accidentally dropped, he felt with a certain reckless unholy delight, that he was more than ever her slave.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ANOTHER MAGNUM.

“YOU’LL find that pretty good lining,” said the host, addressing himself more particularly to his lordship, as though conscious there had been some misunderstanding between them, which in his own house it was his first duty to set right. “It’s sixty-four, and not bad of its kind. Here’s your health, St. Moritz ; I’m glad to see you in my tumbledown old place.”

The other filled his glass and nodded cordially, thinking the while of what some fellow told him the other day at The Travellers about the Bedouins in their tents, and the bread-and-salt which constitutes so sacred a compact between an Arab and his guest.

“Tumbledown, do you call it? I wish you could see mine! You *shall* some day when I can afford to live in it. But these are the best proportioned rooms I know, and so prettily furnished too!”

“That’s my wife’s taste, I only go in for comfort. I hope you fellows *are* comfortable. How about the races to-morrow? I suppose we all go?”

“I do! I do! I do!” was repeated in a chorus of consent, varied only by the plaintive accents of Mrs. Tregarthen’s dandy, who observed meekly: “I suppose I must!”

As he was the most reckless speculator of the whole party, “plunging heavily,” to use his own words, “when he could see his way,” this assumption of indifference seemed to be accepted for what it was worth.

“Let us count noses then,” said their host; “there’s a special at eleven, and I can take you all to the station. Let me see, the break,

the pony-carriage, and the brougham for anybody who is afraid of getting wet. Yes, that's all easy enough."

The rector stared. He remembered a time when Paravant's father kept nothing but a dog-cart, and painted his name on that in letters an inch long, to avoid the tax! Well, well, we live in a world of change! but for the present, this sixty-four was superlative, and the bottle had come round to him again!

He emptied it with such good-will that Paravant rang the bell on the instant for a magnum of the same, brought in with as much care as a baby in arms. Tongues began to wag. A discussion on to-morrow's handicap brought out much difference of opinion, and more than one betting-book. Ere the measure was half-empty, several wagers had been entered, a point better, or worse, than the current odds in the ring.

“ Will the hurdle-race fill ? ” asked somebody, whereon Mrs. Tregarthen’s dandy turned a fresh page, and emptied his glass.

“ It’s a new thing altogether,” observed Paravant, “ but the farmers like it, and the country people. It gets together a few fifty-pound screws, and nobody cares if they break their necks or not. I’ve put one in for the fun of the thing.”

“ Quite right,” said the large dandy ; “ very public-spirited. But you’ll lose your entrance-money.”

“ How do you mean ? ”

“ Why, they’ve brought Adonis down on purpose. I met Sloper at the station. They’ve got the race in their pocket.”

“ We must have a shy at him, for the honour of the West. He’s a good horse, but I never liked his shoulders, and he’s half worn-out.”

“ Will you lay against him ? ”

“Yes, if there’s anything of a field—an even pony.”

“Say five-to-four.”

“Very well; five-to-four, in ponies.”

So the wager was entered on both sides, and Paravant made a beginning.

“What is *your* horse’s name?” asked Lord St. Moritz, more out of courtesy than from any real interest in the matter.

“Potboy,” answered the host. “By Gany-mede, out of Froth, half-bred—a useful hack, and that is about all.”

“Will you back him?” asked the former speculator.

“I should want very long odds,” answered Paravant doubtfully. “It’s such an off-chance, if the others can stand up; but the hurdles will be stiff, and the ground is slippery at the back of the course. I would take twenty-to-one.”

“Twenty-to-one, my dear fellow! It’s not

twenty-to-one I finish this glass of claret! Who rides him?"

"Hum! that's another difficulty. It's too late to engage a jockey. I shall have to ride him myself."

"Impossible! You must be more than a stone over weight! You can't get that off in a single walk. I'll tell you what, if it's 'owner up,' I don't mind laying twelve-to-one—six-hundred-to-fifty. That's a choker, I think!"

"It is a mouthful, but I'll try to swallow it," answered Paravant, pencil in hand, while he rang the bell for another magnum, looking round to ask quietly, "Will anybody do it again?" There is something in good claret, freely swallowed, especially provocative of speculation the night before a race—the large handsomely-cut decanter came round to him again, their host had booked several more bets offered by his guests for smaller sums, and on

a gradually decreasing scale of odds. Even the rector, though such hazardous investments were wholly out of his line, ventured a modest sovereign, on the success of his former pupil, backing him from a sense of loyalty and affection, with a strong idea he was likely to win. "Forward James," after offering more wine, which was declined, followed the others to the drawing-room, chuckling to think of the heavy wagers for which he had "drawn" them, as he called it, and rejoiced especially over a certain hundred-pounds-to-ten laid him by Lord St. Moritz. If the little horse could only pull it off to-morrow, he would be free of his most vexatious liabilities. But he had ventured largely, it was a case of "a man or a mouse," and he dared not anticipate the alternative, if it should come up "mouse!" The large dandy had no such apprehensions. Ten times in the year, at Epsom, at Ascot, at Goodwood, at all the Newmarket meetings,

besides minor races, within the reach of London, he was in the habit of winning or losing his annual income in two days, with perfect equanimity and satisfaction, bringing to bear on the mere amusements of life an amount of memory, judgment, sagacity, and cool imperturbable good-temper, that must have commanded success in its most important affairs.

Taking to politics *might* save him, but no less engrossing occupation would ever wean him from the dangerous excitement of the turf.

Strolling, tall and stately, into the drawing-room, it was but natural that he should gravitate towards the handsomest woman in the company, and he took up a position by the side of his hostess.

This arrangement not quite suiting the intentions of Beltenebrosa, she broke the party up into a looser formation, after coffee,

suggesting whist and music, while she herself moved to a pianoforte at the other end of the room, whither she was followed, as she intended, by Lord St. Moritz.

Two people only took note of this manœuvre, with different feelings, but a strong sense of disapproval and disgust.

The one was Mrs. Tregarthen, whose eyes were always pretty wide open, observing, indeed, many things which had no real existence; the other, Paravant himself, who turned away with a pang that he was ashamed to feel so keenly. Jealousy, contempt, and a sense of undeserved injury, probed him to the quick.

“I thought *that* was over,” he said to himself, “or he never should have darkened my doors again. Hang it! after all, if a fellow can’t trust his own wife in his own house, there’s an end of everything!” and he walked uneasily into the adjoining room,

where the Reverend Silas was playing whist with less skill than daring—the effect, no doubt, of that sound full-bodied sixty-four.

No man who has been separated, for ever so short a time, from the lady he adored, should attempt to take up the thread of his attentions where he left off. I have remarked in church that the gentler sex always begin to yawn when a preacher says “to resume ;” they like breaking fresh ground, even though they may know every inch of the soil ; and, while they want to hear the same thing over and over again, are exceedingly intolerant of an admirer who repeats it in the same words. Lord St. Moritz was far too good a judge to offend in this way, he spoke in an audible voice, and ventured on nothing more compromising than the following inoffensive question :

“Is it far to the course—and what time do you mean to start ?”

“I’m not going.”

“Not going! Signora, you only say that to bully me. What have I done?”

“Bully you! I haven’t the heart. But I’m not going to races, all the same.”

“Why?”

“Fancy asking a woman *why!* Perhaps I’ve got a cold. Perhaps I’ve *not* got a new dress. No; I don’t mind telling *you*. The railway gives me a headache—one can’t come away when one’s tired—Mr. Paravant is going to ride—and I hate the whole thing!”

Now this was far from the truth. Bel-tenebrosa saw very sufficient reason for absenting herself from Swansdown Races in the certainty that her gipsy kin would attend. Her resources had been already overtaxed by the repeated extortions of Jericho Lee, and she would give him no opportunity of frightening her into bribery that she could avoid.

“I looked forward so to going with *you*,” said his lordship plaintively. “We might

have banked together, and been so happy, and won a lot of money !”

“ You are always thinking of *money* !”

“ People say ‘ For love or money, ’” he answered, drawing closer. “ I know which I think of *here* .”

Striking a chord on the instrument so deep as to drown her words for all but him, she replied : “ Base coin, sham notes, false hearts ! Nobody is to be trusted. I said in my haste all men are—— What ?”

“ You may depend on *me* ,” he murmured. “ Oh ! why will you not believe in my——”

She rattled off a lively air, up and down the keys, that brought half-a-dozen guests round to listen, as she well knew it would, and, looking mischievously in his disconcerted face, asked him if she should sing him a song.

What *could* he answer but that it would be delightful ?

“ And the subject ?” she continued.

“Love, of course,” he whispered.

“No! Money!—gold and silver. Listen, my lord, and learn your lesson, and don’t forget it another time!”

GOLD AND SILVER.

“Oh, pretty Miss Disdainful, at whose feet I love to rest,
You will not speak, but fling me down the rosebud from
your breast;
And prove the Eastern proverb is as truthful as it’s old,
Which tells us speech is silver, but that silence, dear, is
gold.”

“Oh, pleasant Sir Persistent, you have talk enough for
both,
And though you swore, yet none the more, I’ll trust you
on your oath;
For mamma has often warned me, that she certainly
should scold,
If she caught me taking silver when I paid for it in
gold!”

“But I would like to deck you out in jewels rich and
rare,
The ruby round your finger and the diamond in your
hair;

And I would give you love for love, and access uncontrolled
To all my store, and ten times more, of silver and of gold."

"I wish I could believe you, dear, 'twould gladden me I own ;
Or you had never brought me here, so late, and all alone.
Yet thus to meet is more than sweet, and moonlight makes one bold,
Although it's only silver, love, the sunlight's really gold !"

The moon retired ; the pallid dawn flushed softly into day,
And pleasant Sir Persistent went rejoicing on his way ;
But Miss Disdainful dropped a tear ; the tale has oft been told—
Man scatters silver fast enough, but woman pays in gold !

"Then Sir Persistent won!" observed Lord St. Moritz.

"A man *always* wins," she answered, "if he *means* to win. Some people don't know what they like ; some don't like what they know, and so the world goes round !"

The large dandy, who had been playing

whist, now came forward to express his approval, and soon the company were gathered round the pianoforte, all but one.

“She sings for *him*, not *me!*” thought Paravant, with a bitter sense of pique and humiliation, that, he felt ashamed to think, had he been a woman, would have found relief in tears. “And this is what one gets in return for all kinds of trouble and vexation, for entertaining a lot of people one don’t care two straws about, for no end of expense, and the loss of that liberty which a fellow never appreciates till it’s gone. Ah! better have remained a bachelor. Hang it! I didn’t know when I was well off!”

But he had little time for these gloomy reflections. There was Mrs. Tregarthen to pack into a nondescript carriage waiting to take her home, candles to light for the ladies, wine-and-water to offer, good-nights to exchange, and a dreary tobacco parliament to

dissolve before he could retire to his room, sullen, heartsick, hopeless, deriving only a spurious consolation from the prospect of excitement arising out of bodily peril to-morrow in the coming hurdle-race.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PACE THAT KILLS.

“MY DEAR PARAVANT,

“A horrible headache and premonitory twinges of gout will keep me a prisoner, while you are all amusing yourselves at Swansdown. I wish you luck, though I did lay against the blue and yellow.

“Yours truly,

“ST. MORITZ.

“I don't think the claret is to blame. I was seedy when I left London.”

“Is Lord St. Moritz getting up?” asked his host of the footman who handed him this missive at breakfast.

The footman, true to his order, did not know ; but, on inquiry, it appeared his lordship's valet had taken a cup of tea to his lordship, who was not to be disturbed till he rang.

"Forward James" looked very black, directing angry scowls at Beltenebrosa behind her tea and coffee-pots, the reason for which will presently appear. He ate nothing, but drank a brandy-and-soda—very weak of the soda.

"Muzzle on, I see," observed the large dandy, glowing in health and vigour from his morning tub, with an excellent appetite for this as for all other meals.

"That wasting is simply torture while it lasts. 'Pon my soul, though I say it that shouldn't, you deserve to win for your pluck!"

"I'll have a shy," said the other, "if I lose my stick!" but he answered mechanically, and as if he attached no particular meaning to his words, leaving the room thereafter with fixed

eye and wandering step, like one who is stunned by a blow.

Ten minutes later, when the carriages came round, he appeared in his wife's boudoir, where he was sure to find her alone, and carefully shut the door.

"What's the meaning of this?" he began, in a loud angry voice, with an offensive assumption of authority, that roused Beltenebrosa into rebellion at once.

"I ought to ask *you* that question," she replied haughtily. "If you choose to forget you are a gentleman, don't forget that I am a——"

"A d—d gipsy foundling!" he interrupted furiously. "A thing I picked out of the gutter, and washed, and cleaned, and dressed up in silks and satins, and—— No. I'm not going to lose my temper, and use bad language. I have nothing to say but this: It's a plant. Oh! a devilish good plant, Mrs. Paravant;

but I'm up to it! I suspected there was something in it all through. I'm not such a fool as people think. You wouldn't go to the races. Oh no! You were afraid of the gipsies; that was a capital excuse. And it makes you nervous to see me ride. *Me!* You never cared a curse for me! I might have known it all along. You won't be nervous, alone, with that smooth-tongued scoundrel who is shamming ill upstairs at this moment on purpose to stay at home with you. I've got an account to settle with *him*, too; but that can keep cold. I'll win his hundred first—he hates parting—and then we'll square up!”

He stopped, more, I believe, from want of breath than grievances; and Beltenebrosa, while justly indignant, could not but feel something of respect for this frank impetuous nature, flying out in a passion honestly like a child.

“ Mr. Paravant,” said she, “ your language

and behaviour are what I am not accustomed to, and do not intend to endure. Something has put you out. You are very much excited at this moment. I hope you will come back in a better humour and beg my pardon."

Her coolness drove him wild. "Pardon!" he gasped, choking with rage. "By Jove, that *is* too good a joke! When I come back, too! Now listen to me. I *order* you, madam, to come with us to these races. The carriage is at the door. Put your bonnet on this instant, and jump in!"

"I will *not*!"

He was at his wit's-end, looking from side to side, as if to find some physical engine of coercion. In vain. The bridle has not yet been invented to control a woman enraged with a man for whom she has no respect.

His distress was so pitiful that she could not help continuing, with something of contempt: "I'll go and spend the day at the

Vicarage, or the Castle, if you like, but to the races, I repeat, I will *not* go !”

“The Vicarage ! It’s barely half a mile from this door. The Castle ! They’ve got a party on purpose, and will be gone to the course. No. You can’t gammon *me* ! It’s all of a piece, and I ought not to be surprised ; but though I knew I had married a gipsy I didn’t think I had married a——”

“Stop !” she exclaimed. “There are insults I will *not* submit to ! You had better go—now—at once !”

“And never come back ? Nothing you would like better ! How pleased you’d be if I were to break my neck !”

He had goaded her beyond self-command, and she replied hastily : “What do I care whether you break it or not ?”

“Then I hope to God I may !” said poor Paravant, in a thick hoarse voice, and bend-

ing down his flushed and swollen forehead, he lifted, literally, the hem of her garment and pressed it to his lips, but he was gone before she could speak a word. And though she followed, calling after him in the passage, he never stopped nor turned his head, but sprang to the box of the break, which he drove himself, and started his horses down the avenue at the rate of fifteen miles an hour.

Lord St. Moritz, in a dressing-gown, watching from his window, saw a footman run after the carriage, which he failed to overtake, with his master's overcoat, nor did he think of forwarding this garment by the pony-carriage or brougham, as they followed in due succession; but this characteristic negligence interested his lordship not at all.

He made an elaborate toilet, and descended the stairs in about an hour, with every hope and intention of spending an agreeable after-

noon. He was disappointed not to find Mrs. Paravant in the drawing-room, surprised to search library, boudoir, and conservatory in vain, perplexed and angry when he discovered, by personal inspection, that she was neither in the house, the garden, nor in the grounds. Not till luncheon was getting cold did a servant inform him that she had left home before twelve o'clock.

Haunted by a foreboding of evil, that oppressed her as the coming thunderstorm seems to stifle us, while outward nature remains calm and tranquil in the heavy atmosphere of a sultry day, Beltenebrosa was now more than twenty miles off, threading a path she remembered only too well, that led from Brimscombe Station, through Brimscombe Brake, direct to Swansdown race-course. Would she get there in time? That was the one idea, to which everything on earth seemed of secondary importance. The hurdle-race

was fixed for three o'clock. Would she get there in time? She must speak to him again before he weighed and mounted. There was a look in his face, while he kissed her dress, that she feared to see all her life long, every night in her dreams. Three o'clock already! Her watch must be too fast! She had a mile farther to walk. Would she be there in time? Would she be there in time?

Her first impulse had been to run after him, as he left the house, but before she could put her bonnet on, the guests departed, and took all the carriages, so it was impossible to catch the special train. Another would follow later, and Bradshaw told her it ought to reach Brimscombe by half-past two. It arrived there late, of course, and no vehicle could be got for love or money; everything on wheels was at the races. She had walked from Combe-Wester to the railway—it was no slight tax on her pedestrian powers to finish her task at the

rate of nearly five miles an hour ; but in her preoccupation she was wholly insensible to bodily fatigue, and if she gave a thought to her efforts, it was only to exult in the symmetry of shape and perfect physical organisation, that enabled her to cover the ground with such swift easy strides.

“A gipsy !” she said to herself, rather bitterly. “You needn’t have reproached me with that ! It’s lucky I *am* a gipsy—*pur sang*—I’m not ashamed of it. One of your fair, florid, flabby women would have failed a mile back, and been too late !”

Lord St. Moritz never entered her head but once, and then she almost laughed aloud to picture his vexation and disappointment. From her husband’s intemperate reproaches, she gathered enough to understand the trick his lordship intended to play, for which she gave him credit, all being fair in love and war ; but there was something about the rapidity of

this baffling countermarch that amused her exceedingly, and for a moment she lost sight of her own anxiety in the humour of the situation.

It soon came back with redoubled force. As she drew near the race-course and heard the shouts of the people, she rushed forward, forgetting her fatigue, her wild appearance, her disordered dress, even the dreaded gipsy folk, lost to every consideration, but the one maddening possibility that she might be too late after all.

The hurdles were up, she marked them a bow-shot off. How white and dangerous they looked, grinning at her, as it were, in cruel mockery and reproach! The horses had already started. Their rapid hoof-beat sounded like thunder in her ears, the whirl and flutter of those many-coloured silks baffled and confused her sight; but with straining eyes she made out the blue and yellow cap hurrying to

the front, as he reached the last leap but one—breathless, faint, with parted lips and clenched hands, her every faculty, her whole being absorbed in a painful intensity of suspense.

Now although the knowledge and attention of an experienced trainer had rendered the little horse perfectly fit to contend in any struggle exacting wind, speed, and sustained muscular exertion, his jockey was in the worst possible frame of mind to ride the kind of race that especially requires coolness, patience, and temper, to ensure success. Pot-boy did not gallop a quarter of a mile in the rush and hurry of a crowded start without protesting, in his own way, against the violent intemperate handling of his master. Always a free horse, an angry jerk of the bridle and a stab with the spurs maddened him to recklessness, and he broke fairly out of control, making the running over the first two flights of hurdles at a speed not inaptly described as

alarming by those who witnessed it from the stand. Such pace, however, sobered the animal, while it seemed to intoxicate the rider, and though a timely pull, even now, a mile from the winning-post, would have done good service, as Potboy began to flag, Paravant only hustled him along the faster. "Like all these gentlemen-jockeys," said the rider of Adonis, dismounting a few minutes later with a shake of his crafty head, "in too great a hurry to get home!"

Beltenebrosa, leaning against a post that supported the fifth leap—four honest feet of sawn timber, pegged and secured on ground as hard as a dining-room table—must have seen, though she was never able to describe, exactly what happened. The blue and yellow cap came at it very fast, but Potboy swayed and wavered from the direct line in a form that warned experienced eyes he was beginning to fail.

“Catch hold of his head, for God’s sake !” exclaimed a bystander.

“Come up !” shouted Paravant, deaf, or at least in no way responding to the appeal. A horse so extended was unable to spring. Potboy tried to stop himself, took off, half a stride too late, got under the hurdles, struck them with his chest, and turned completely over in the same moment that Beltenebrosa, wondering why a mountain of green grass should rise to meet the sky, fainted dead away.

She was spared a sickening sight. That complicated ball of girths, shoes, gleaming spurs, white breeches, blue, yellow, and chestnut, with a crowd of black figures swarming round like insects on an ant-hill, presently resolved itself into horse and rider, the one rising with a snort and shake to gallop wildly on after its comrades through a lane of shouting hundreds, reins dangling, stirrups flapping,

head and tail up, staring from side to side, as conscious of something fatally amiss, the other lying limp and still, froth on his lip, eyes dim and glazed, mouth open, hands clenched, looking as if he was never to speak or move again!

The race was won by an outsider. No more casualties occurred at the last hurdle, near the distance, which the chestnut, cantering conscientiously in with his empty saddle, leaped temperately and well, though crossed by Adonis still fresh and full of running, the jockey of that successful plater having, at this crisis, displayed much presence of mind and fertility of resource.

As long as Potboy was leading he kept far in the rear, meaning to lose so much ground as it would be impossible to regain, when he made his final effort, with any appearance of honesty and no chance of success. But the chestnut being disposed of, the others, who had been a good deal scattered,

made the pace so ridiculously bad, that such a horse as Adonis could not have come in but as a winner, without provoking a row on the race-course, and an appeal to the stewards. Therefore did this consummate equestrian and rogue pull his horse out of the course at the last hurdle, make his effort at the right moment, finish splendidly, and win by three-quarters of a length, to be subsequently disqualified for going the wrong side of the post.

“The beggar always had one side to his mouth,” said a stableman, out of place, to Jericho Lee, when the decision of the authorities was made known.

“Very likely,” answered the gipsy, who had frequented races all his life, and generally kept his eyes open; “but he’d got a bridle in it, and might have been held straight on the other!”

And Jericho swore, wishing he had known in time which way the money was, so as to

have "stood in" with the robbery, and pocketed his share of its spoils. He felt aggrieved, ill-used, and, to use his own expression, "down on his luck." Fighting Jack was not yet out of prison. Nance had made but little profit by fortune-telling, and the gentleman from whom, through his gipsy wife, he had hoped to extort a decent annuity, was as good as dead.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TOO LATE.

“HE’s spoke at last, ma’am. He’s asked for you!”

Beltenebrosa had left the darkened room, his mother’s room, where her husband lay senseless, but for a few minutes, after watching him day and night since his accident forty-eight hours ago. Paravant’s old nurse had been sent from Combe-Appleton to attend on him, by the forethought of Mrs. Tregarthen, whose own services were at the disposal of anyone in real distress, though she forbore to press them at Combe-Wester in such a crisis as the present.

The last two days cast a gloom over the

village and surrounding district. People began to acknowledge merits in the sufferer, to which they had been hitherto blind enough. Each man told his neighbour, as if it were a brilliant discovery, that "there was a deal of good in him, and for *his* part, he always liked the young squire!" It mattered very little now.

Everything had been done after the accident that care and kindness could suggest. The London guests behaved with delicacy and consideration. The large dandy even spent a night in the public-house near Combe-Wester Gate, that he might be on the spot should his host or hostess find any use for him in their trouble. Lord St. Moritz did not venture to request an interview with the latter. He caught sight of her face while she followed her shattered, unconscious husband up the staircase, and it fairly frightened him. So altered and warped were its lineaments,

that he glanced instinctively at her hair, to make sure it had not turned gray!

There was a surgeon standing on the race-course, within a hundred yards of where the accident happened. This man slept at Combe-Wester, and scarcely left his patient for an hour. He had taken off limbs, tied up arteries, studied his noble art, and helped his fellow-creatures to live and die in every climate under heaven. He possessed the skill, the tact, the readiness of resource, and, above all, the iron nerve we so seldom see wanting in his profession; but his stout heart ached for the agony he read too plainly in Mrs. Paravant's stony gaze.

“It won't last long,” he whispered to the old nurse, moving about with streaming eyes, in her clean cap and neat white apron. “But you'll have another patient to look after when you've done with your master, or I'm very much mistaken. Get her to eat and drink some-

thing, my good woman. There's little hope for one, but it won't do to lose both!" He told his wife afterwards, that the steadiness with which Mrs. Paravant assisted him in all necessary details was the worst symptom of her case. There seemed something so unnatural in a composure that he attributed less to the oriental blood in her veins than to the misery of a crushing and stupefying despair.

How trifling now seemed the little faults and shortcomings of that departing wayfarer, bound on the inevitable journey from which there is no return! Could she have foreseen such a time as this, would she ever have had the heart to feel vexed with him for treading on her dress, asking the wrong people to dinner, prosing about his horses, growling when she kept him waiting, or such every-day marital imperfections common to husbands of every class? If he could but come back from the brink—that awful brink, on the borders

of—where?—only come back one step, she would never be provoked with him again! She would be such a true, and kind, and obedient wife, giving him all her thoughts, confidences, affections—loving him—yes, loving him—as a mother loves her child, it may be, rather than as a woman loves her lord. She could have cried aloud with pain and remorse when she recalled the scene in the boudoir, and the pitiful look in his honest eyes, never again, perhaps, to meet her own. Would he die without forgiving her? Beltenebrosa went down on her knees to pray.

It is not for us to judge how far the unaccustomed spirit can lend itself to devotion habitually neglected, and only resorted to as the outcry of anguish too keen to bear alone. She grew calmer, at least, while imploring help from Heaven, and nerved herself to carry the burden laid on her as best she might.

Yes, we ought to be kind to each other

here, in the little segment of a circle which, as an infinitesimal portion of eternity, we have accustomed ourselves to call life. We are but tenants at will. Is it worth while to fret, and strive, and malign our neighbour within such narrow borders, when every morning's post may bring us notice to quit ?

For Paravant to-day, as may befall you and me to-morrow, and many more of us before the week is out, a summons had been served. A noiseless step halted on the threshold, and there was "somebody knocking at the door !"

"He's asked for *you*." She glanced in the old nurse's face, and her poor heart stood still. There was something about the woman's mouth and chin that told its own tale. Beltenebrosa felt she had cherished more than a spark of hope, that seemed extinguished now for the first time.

Her husband lay in his mother's room, on

the bed in which he was born. Over the fireplace hung a picture of himself and his pony, aged six each—a bright, sturdy, bold-faced boy, a short-legged pony that looked as if nothing could throw it down. The nurse remembered how he insisted on sleeping in his new boots the night before his first day's hunting. It brought a fresh burst of tears to the old eyes, that might have been dry now, so freely had they wept for a lifetime over the sorrows of others and their own.

When Beltenebrosa re-entered the sick-room she was bringing out some bandages, softly, skilfully, and with that indescribable soothing air only attained by those who are accustomed to children, ministering to their little wants and troubles as they arise.

“Forward James” had regained consciousness. There was recognition of his wife in those sunken eyes, and he moved the unshattered arm that lay on the coverlet, as

though he would have raised it in a caress if he could.

One moment her heart leaped up, the next it seemed to fall like a wounded bird, that flutters and dies out. It needed no experience of death-beds, to read the meaning of that glitter in his eyes, those lines in his wasted, chiselled face.

“I never knew my boy was so beautiful,” thought his old nurse. “He’s as like his poor mother as he can stare. She’s an angel in heaven now.”

He moved his lips. Beltenebrosa bent her head to listen. One of her long black locks fell across his hand, and the poor thin fingers fastened on it, turning it in and out, with a feeble, loving touch.

“Oh, my darling, my darling!” sobbed the broken-hearted woman; “forgive me, forgive me. My punishment is greater than I can bear.”

He whispered something she did not catch. Precious, indeed, were those syllables she used to think of such small account. How could she ever have wearied of that voice, so soon to be mute for evermore !

The nurse, moving softly round the bed, put some cordial to his wan lips, and they curved in a weak, wavering smile.

“ Good-bye, Bel ! ” he whispered. “ Don’t cry, dear. We didn’t get on so bad. Good-bye. ”

Even such slight effort seemed to exhaust him, and for a space he lay motionless, her hand in his. So quiet was his breathing, she thought more than once it was all over. The excruciating pains of his return to consciousness had left him ; he was easier now, and comparatively comfortable. The surgeon knew, and so did the nurse, this respite only anticipated eternal tranquillity in the grave.

There came a quiver on the wasted features,

so white, so waxen, so sadly beautiful. At last a tremble like that which stirs some lonely pool in the cold breath of a December dawn. Their hands were locked. Leaning over him she looked into his eyes with hungry, hopeless longing. Alas, they were already blank in the coming forgetfulness. His thoughts seemed wandering, his mind adrift. What was that he murmured? Something to *her*—some charge to be held sacred for all time, the outcome of a kindly nature, struggling up through failing senses and clouded brain.

“It wasn’t the little horse’s fault,” he murmured. “I put on too much steam. Take care of Potboy.” Then his fingers twined round her own, tighter, tighter, till gradually the grasp relaxed, the eye rolled and grew dim, the jaw dropped, and James Paravant floated peacefully away into the unknown, leaving behind him but a crushed and mangled husk of that which three days

ago was a fresh, bright, athletic young man, barely turned twenty-three !

If carriages could have consoled his widow she would have had comfort enough. There must have been forty at the funeral, while the labourers of his own and an adjoining parish, walking six abreast, formed a procession half-a-mile long. Certain Foresters, too, and other friendly clubs, attended in imposing order, wearing green bows and marching with due solemnity, though more or less in drink. Neighbouring public-houses did a good stroke of business, for grief, and more especially sympathy, is apt to be thirsty on a hot autumn day. Even the sexton's nose was red, while the Rev. Silas, with wet eyes and broken voice, could hardly get through the touching burial-service of his church ; and one of the school-children, a soft-hearted little maid of six, throwing flowers on the coffin, blubbered aloud. The rector had a

large congregation the following Sunday, who would have been much disappointed had he failed to touch on the recent calamity in his discourse.

He drew a parallel, therefore, fetching it from a considerable distance, between Absalom and their late neighbour, alluding also to the ancestors of the deceased, one of whom was reposing in effigy outside his tomb in that very church, cross-legged and hugging his sword like a bold Crusader, in stone, and insisted, with questionable taste, that this too, the last of the Paravants, had died gallantly in his spurs.

A flight that seemed exceedingly appropriate to old Reuben Rasper, formerly a rough-rider, till constant drink was found to be incompatible with that profession, who expressed approval of the preacher's oratory, observing with some reason that "'Twas mortal true; an' ev' squire hadn't a-had on

they (meaning the persuaders), 'ad a'-bin
'loive and kickin', mebbe, nowe!"

So "Forward James" died and was buried,
and this was his R. I. P.

Book IV.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ALL ALONE.

FORGOTTEN? Not immediately; yet sooner, perhaps, than anyone who attended his funeral might have expected. Even when the finest oak in the park has been blown down, the gap in our landscape seems filled up before we have time to appreciate the loss. How much less likely are we to miss some useless sapling, broken at an obscure corner of the wood!

In less than three months, Combe-Wester was let, with a special agreement for the sumptuous board and lodging of Potboy, to a

worthy family, whose transactions do not enter into this history. James Paravant's affairs, having been placed in the hands of an Exeter attorney, were found exceedingly difficult of arrangement. His furniture was sold, his house dismantled, his hatchment taken down, his chimneys were swept, and his widow was gone.

The utter prostration following so stunning a blow was succeeded by an interval of sharp, sickening pain, that passed away in turn, the more quickly, perhaps, for its acute severity, and Beltenebrosa soon found herself equal to the task of grappling with a thousand difficulties that beset her on every side. These were so far beneficial that they served to distract her mind from the one overwhelming sorrow, and every hour of such forgetfulness was so much gain of strength and vitality, like the relief afforded by anodynes to a throbbing wound.

Poor James Paravant had lived, since his marriage, at a rate to which his income, multiplied by ten, would have been wholly inadequate. There was money owing for everything. The funds he had raised were always wanted to settle his account on those black Mondays, at Tattersall's, when we see men in hansoms hurrying to Albert Gate, with such varying expressions of countenance. His new furniture was unpaid for, so were the alterations in his house. The very wages of day-labourers and farm-servants were months in arrear, and Beltenebrosa, assisted by the Exeter attorney, had to pacify, for she could not satisfy, a score of creditors, one-third of whom it was impossible to pay in full.

Her gipsy blood did her good service in such an emergency. The nature she derived from her ancestors stiffened itself, as it were, against mental suffering, bearing sorrow with something of that quiet dogged defiance it

would have opposed to bodily pain. She entertained, too, their elastic principles, on certain notions of probity and honour, which are apt to hamper the arrangements of an insolvent, and she had no scruples in driving hard bargains with struggling tradesmen, who seemed fain to accept the present tangible crown, in discharge of a visionary and uncertain pound, to which they were entitled.

The Exeter attorney could not disguise his admiration. “What a head for business!” he was heard to exclaim. “What memory! What a knowledge of mankind! And then such manners, such a presence, such a figure! Five feet seven in her stockings if she’s an inch! Walks like a queen! Black as midnight! Mag—nificent!” And he rubbed his hands chuckling, thinking, perhaps, what a partner she would have made in his office, *bien entendu*—not his parlour, for the little man was blessed with an ample wife of his own,

and, as it is called in the West, a *long* family of children.

But when papers without end had been opened, examined, and tied up, docketed and put away, when outstanding debts had been estimated, and accounts finally balanced, it was still found that shillings could not be made to represent half-crowns; and that a very few hundreds a year must suffice the widow to live on out of a fortune valued by acquaintances, with their accustomed liberality, at some thousands. So few, indeed, that even now, though she sold her jewels, she could not raise the amount of her debt to Mervyn Strange, brooding over it, from day to day, with mingled feelings of shame, remorse, and a certain unacknowledged satisfaction that the one link between them remained unbroken still.

When all her business was concluded, and the attorney had gone back to Exeter, Bel-

tenebrosa decided to live in London, choosing to make her home in the great metropolis for many good reasons that she admitted, and one she did not.

It was the cheapest place for a lone woman, and the most independent, so she told herself a hundred times ; also here, less than elsewhere, would she be exposed to the incursions of her kinsfolk ; but she forbore to remind herself that in the capital her period of mourning need not necessarily be one of privation and utter seclusion, and that it would be pleasant to meet, if only for a minute, while they smiled a "How-d'ye-do?" the faces—amongst others that of Lord St. Moritz—she used to see in happier times.

Even for a beauty dethroned, or at any rate in a period of apogee, it seems consolatory to occupy the ground of former victories ; besides, London is a large place, where people run against each other every day, and nobody

a bit the wiser, particularly in the dead time of the year.

Was she hankering after Lord St. Moritz still? I think it probable. I think, even if she found no room for tenderer feelings, she longed for the excitement of his company, the amusement of his conversation. Perhaps, too, his lordship's professions of devotion, having always been as fervent as she would permit, the possibility may have crossed her mind of a presentation at Court in the right of an English peeress, conferring high and undisputed rank amongst the very people of whom last season she got tired in six weeks. It would be rather nice, besides, to have a coronet on her handkerchiefs and the panels of her carriages.

If so, she reckoned without her host. More than one of her sex, and many of his own, could have told her how, warned perhaps by domestic experience, St. Moritz, as regarded the marriage-yoke, was like one of those

refractory horses that no persuasion will induce to accept the servitude of harness. The fairest hands in London had tried to caparison him without avail. None, so to speak, could get the collar quite over his ears. He winced, started back, slipped his head out, reared up, turned round and galloped away! So long as a lady could not possibly be made his wife, for the incontestable reason that she was married to somebody else, so long did his lordship worship at her shrine with touching devotion, bewailing his own hard lot and hers in the choicest phrases and the sweetest tones. He was never more agreeable than when lachrymose. Like a wet cloth passed over a picture, melancholy seemed to bring out the soft touches and tender shades of his character, and he could turn from grave to gay with a quaint half-pathetic humour, exceedingly agreeable to women, who thoroughly enjoy an excited half-hysterical state, in which they

don't know whether to laugh or to cry. But no sooner did the slender fingers close to secure their prize, than the cheat became apparent, the bubble burst, and it appeared that his lordship was neither true, nor even base metal, but only quicksilver after all.

When a decent term of mourning expired, and Mrs. Tregarthen had written to inquire after her welfare in choice language, offering condolence, advice, and even hints, if necessary, of assistance, Beltenebrosa found herself wondering why Lord St. Moritz made no sign. We may be sure she gave directions for her letters to be forwarded from Combe-Wester. Yet day after day passed without bringing a line. In London, where humanity is persecuted with a post every two hours, their very frequency renders the heart callous to such disappointments; but Beltenebrosa, who was beginning to feel lonely and a good deal tired of her own society, would have been cheered by a glance

at the familiar handwriting, of which she kept more than one specimen hidden away in a repository of her own. She looked at these often enough, reading them over with interest rather than emotion, never kissing them with wet eyes, as she did a bit of silver paper containing a morsel of poor Paravant's coarse brown hair; and yet she could not help telling herself she had cared for neither of these—the faithless lover nor the foolish husband, as it was in her nature to care for Somebody, with a capital S, if that Somebody only came to ask for what was already more than half his own.

Yes, I appeal to ladies with many grown-up daughters, fond fathers doting on one whom they dread to lose; chaperones, indeed, of all weights and ages, whether any amount of care or anxiety will preserve their pullet from its clutches, when the real falcon-gentle is seen hovering in the sky. For fowl of every other feather she is amenable to

caution. Rank, wealth, and renown, spurs, bouquets, and compliments, lord, and squire, and knight of the shire, she can resist them, one and all, till swift, sure, and silent, down slides the bird of fate. A swoop, a stir, a little timid chirp, a ruffling of callow feathers, and the hawk takes possession of its own. Why? For this simple reason, that whatever characters may be engraved on his card, the visitor's real name is Mr. Right!

But at this period a morning-call would have been exceedingly welcome to Beltenebrosa, whether from Mr. Right or Mr. Wrong. She rented a pretty set of rooms in the far west of Western London, with an idea that it would be delightful to avail herself of Kensington Gardens, the walks by the Serpentine, and such romantic solitudes, but seldom took advantage of them after all. It was a retreat in which a middle-aged person, who had done with the excitements

and preferred the comforts of life, might have been happy enough, but after a few weeks the old restlessness took possession of her. And though she was too proud to make any appeal to, or inquiries about, Lord St. Moritz, and only knew that he was in town by the merest accident, having been obliged to pass through the street in which he lived, where she saw his carriage at the door, she would have liked to know something about his doings, and found herself wishing more than once for that enchanted mirror, in which the magician showed "Gentle Surrey" the image of his ladye-love, indulging in the dangerous and reprehensible practice of reading in bed by candle-light. Not that he could have found fault with her, as—

All in her night-robe loose she lay reclined,
And pensive read, from tablet eburnine,
Some strain that seemed her inmost heart to find—
That favoured strain was Surrey's raptured line,
That fair and lovely form, the Lady Geraldine.

Nevertheless, it is just as well the mirror has been long since broken. Few of us would be greeted with so pleasing an apparition as met the noble Howard. Could Beltenebrosa's dark eyes have pierced through a mile or so of bricks and mortar, and the walls of a pretty little house in Mayfair, she would indeed have beheld the form of Lord St. Moritz, well-dressed and *débonnaire* as usual, but might scarcely have approved, though both seemed agreeable enough, of his situation or his companion.

The latter was neither reading nor pensive, and so far from lying reclined in a loose night-robe, was standing upright, with one foot on the fender, in the scantiest of morning dresses, drawn very tight at its skirt, and representing the popular notion of a mermaid. So close a garment, in such an attitude, did justice to the exquisite proportions of the siren—no other than Mrs. Stripwell, in her little drawing-room, at five o'clock tea.

His lordship made a remark to that effect, expressing admiration of her exterior, and the lady laughed as usual.

“I’m glad you like it,” said she, “it’s an old rag I’ve worn for ages. I thought I had given it to my maid. You’ve seen it often enough.”

“Never till to-day, I could take my solemn oath. Do you think I forget what you wear, or what you say, or what you do, or what you *don’t*? I sometimes wish I could!”

“Humbug! Don’t be sentimental. I remember now, the last time you saw me in it you had eyes only for that negro woman with the queer name. You needn’t pretend to forget. You know you quarrelled with me for calling her Aunt Sally. What’s become of her? Gone back to the Gold Coast?”

His heart smote him. It was injudicious to remind him of a lost love, that he had no idea where to find. The very hopelessness of its renewal gave a zest to the memory of

his past attachment, and Mrs. Stripwell had better have conformed to a cautious proverb that bids us "Let sleeping dogs lie."

"Why do you call her a negro-woman? She is an Italian. Poor thing! Don't you know she lost her husband in the autumn?"

"Did she? I wish I could lose mine. He's *too* tiresome. Wrote to say he should be back from Melton yesterday, and telegraphs this afternoon that he won't be here for a fortnight."

"I'm sure he's not much in your way when he *is* here."

"You don't know. But that's a different question. What I hate is being put out in my arrangements. If I had known, I could have gone with you to-night to the Nonsuch. I should like to see this new thing; they say it's good fun."

"You can come now. I'll order stalls at once."

“But I promised Algy to dine with his mother and sisters.”

“Throw him over.”

“How like a *man!* I’m not sure I sha’n’t, all the same. I hear that conceited Mr. Delapré makes up into a capital gipsy. Good gracious, Lord St. Moritz! it as just dawned on me. Your heart is hankering after the dark people still. I believe your black love *is* a gipsy. That’s why you want to go to-night!”

“How very unfair! I was going on purpose to take *you.*”

“But poor little Algy will break his heart if I disappoint him. You can’t think how he feels it, dear thing.”

This was an opportunity to carry the war into the enemy’s country, “Little Algy,” as she called him, being a stalwart guardsman six feet high, whom Mrs. Stripwell had promoted to her service during the temporary inconstancy of Lord St. Moritz, much to

the disturbance and detriment of a fine young officer. The poor boy was horribly in love, and, it is needless to say, very miserable, suffering in such hands the tortures that render men hereafter women-haters for life. What volumes might be written on the wrongs reciprocally inflicted by the sexes, and the inevitable combats in which wounds are dealt freely and quarter so sparingly shown. Happily these rallies are soon over, for they seem very sharp while they last, and "the weakest must go to the wall."

"I wish you would let 'poor little Algy' alone. You told me you had broken with him and described the scene, which must have been tiresome enough. How *can* you go on playing fast and loose? It's not fair on him—or me!"

"*You!*" she laughed out in perfect good-humour, "of all people in the world, to complain of one's having two strings to one's bow!"

Now, don't be selfish, and don't be exacting ! I only want to see the second thing, and it begins at nine. I'll dine with Algy's belongings first, and go to the play afterwards with *you*, there ! ”

“ Shall you bring your dear Algy ? If so, I had better take an additional stall.”

“ Nonsense ! You know quite well I shall do nothing of the kind. Now you must go, for I expect mamma. Fancy her lecturing me yesterday about Somebody ! Ain't you flattered ? ”

“ I hope mamma's warning had the usual effect, if I am the Somebody.”

“ Don't be conceited. Send round to let me know the numbers of our stalls, before I go to dinner.”

“ I'll wait for you at the door. You won't like going into the theatre alone.”

“ How chivalrous ! It's rather nice of you too. Good-bye.”

So Lord St. Moritz took Bond Street on the way to his club, and secured two stalls for that night's performance at the Nonsuch, missing by five minutes a dark handsome woman in deep mourning, who had been scanning a ground plan of the theatre with much attention, professing an earnest desire to witness from the front row a new melodrama, called "Gipsy John ; or, The Romany's Revenge."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A NEW PLAY.

BELTENEBROSA enjoyed the theatre like a child. Her experience of dramatic amusements was exceedingly limited, but she loved the stage from her heart, even to the glare of the foot-lights and smell of the gas. Taking her walks abroad, she had seen certain shrivelled old men parading Regent Street, placarded before and behind with advertisements of the new melodrama, in letters six inches long. It looked very tempting, particularly as she had, in every sense of the word, been behind the scenes of the little theatre which, according to the papers, overflowed nightly with applauding

spectators of "Gipsy John ; or, The Romany's Revenge."

Such a title, too, enlisted her sympathies and suggested amusement. It would be curious, she thought, to observe how far, with the assistance of dress, decoration, gas-light, and the actor's art, dramatic life could be made to differ from real. She promised herself a treat, and resolved not to be disappointed.

Wearing deep mourning, with all its details, from her jet earrings to her black fan, in the best possible taste, Beltenebrosa took her place in the front row, next the orchestra, soon after the Nonsuch had opened its doors, to sit through some flimsy dance-music and rather a heavy farce, with commendable patience and good-humour. She felt like a miner who emerges into the light of day. If not *of* the world, she was *in* the world once more, and her spirits rose, as rise a charger's

at the trumpet-blast, with the sights and sounds of a well-remembered battlefield. The soft rustle of skirts, the wave of white-gloved hands, the scent of patchouli, and heavy fragrance of hot-house flowers could not fail to recall a thousand joys, triumphs, impossible fancies and delights. It seemed as if she had come back at last to living realities, from seclusion in the cloister or the grave.

Her husband had been dead so short a time, that she did not care to be recognised, and kept her face persistently directed towards the stage; but there never was woman yet who could not see clearly through the back of her head, and she knew as well as the boxkeeper five minutes after they entered the house, that Lord St. Moritz and Mrs. Stripwell were sitting two rows behind her, noting the while every detail of that lady's dress—how well it was put on, how little it covered her, and how much it must have cost.

Poor Algy, too, from a private box, was directing hungry looks through a pair of opera-glasses at the same object. To Prance who sat next her, on one side, Mrs. Stripwell was but a flirting, worldly, commonplace woman, too much dressed—perhaps too much *un*-dressed, wearing, he suspected, a touch of artificial black in her eye-lashes, and pink in her cheeks. To the boy who loved her she seemed a peri, an enchantress, a fairy queen, the one type and ideal of beauty almost divine, for which it would be unspeakable happiness to live, unequalled honour to die.

Perhaps in the whole of that crowded theatre, hers were the only eyes averted from the new melodrama at the rise of the curtain on its first scene, to discover a crescent moon (muslin transparency), and a gipsy encampment covering the stage.

It was received with enthusiastic approval, not undeserved by so artistic a grouping of

figures in judicious obscurity, that brought out the white smoke of their kettles, and glowing embers of the gipsy fires. When the actors were ascertained to be *really* eating and drinking the excitement could not be repressed.

Presently they came forward, they listened, they conversed in gibberish (supposed to be Romany, but Beltenebrosa knew better), they moved about the stage, showing their costumes; the moon rose, one of the fires blazed up, and through a brightening background, peering from behind a massive pasteboard oak, advanced the manager's well-known figure, swarthy, black-browed, gorgeous in bright attire, not badly made-up to represent the conventional gipsy of an English stage. He was greeted with round after round of applause, and an admirer in the gallery prematurely vociferated "Encore!"

It was Mr. Delapré who bowed to the

audience, the bold captain of a predatory band, who turned proudly to his followers and intimated the approach of travellers, strangers of distinction, whose carriage had broken down in the forest, reminding them that the traditions of their race insisted on the hospitable reception of these wayfarers, and immediate performance of the following ditty with its chorus :

GIPSY JOHN.

The gipsy fires are shining,
The kettle sings a song,
And stomachs want their lining
That are empty all day long.
Then welcome if you've lost your way,
For daylight's past and gone,
And strangers might do worse than stay
To house with Gipsy John !

So dip your fingers in the stew,
And drink a cup to me ;
I'll fill again, and drink to you
A health in Romany !

I hope you'll like your dinner—
But it's not polite to brag—
And as I'm a living sinner,
It has cost me not a mag!
That loaf is off the bailiff's board,
A rich cur-mud-ge-on!
The rest comes mostly from my lord,
Purloined by Gipsy John!
Then dip your fingers, &c.

There's fowl of many a feather,
There's a turkey-poult and hen,
A moorcock off the heather,
A mallard from the fen,
A leash of teal, a thumping goose,
As heavy as a swan;
He ought to wear his waistcoat loose
Who dines with Gipsy John!
Then dip your fingers, &c.

And when you're brains are turning,
And you're only fit for bed,
Those lamps in heaven are burning
To light you overhead:
Till waking up, refreshed and bright,
When stars grow pale and wan,
You'll swear they pass a cosy night
Who lodge with Gipsy John!
Then dip your fingers, &c.

The birds of air shall call you,
They are stirring with the day,
No mischief shall befall you
Till we've set you on your way ;
And when you've left the wanderers' camp
To travel blithely on,
Be kind to some poor tinker-tramp,
And think of Gipsy John !
Then dip your fingers, &c.

This characteristic ebullition afforded leisure for three travellers to appear from the side-scenes, and stand about in uncomfortable attitudes while receiving their musical welcome, laying their heads together as if imparting confidences of a mysterious nature. What is it that actors and carriage-horses whisper to each other during a short respite from their respective duties ?

Presently the new comers, advancing to the footlights with backs turned, not very politely, to their picturesque host, commenced rather a tedious conversation in well-chosen phrases, from which it appeared that the taller

was Hospodar, whatever that may mean, of a district called Podolia; that his friend was a Hungarian nobleman, a cousin, a confidant, or a secretary; and that the third was the Hospodar's valet, Fritz, in a hussar uniform, with a red nose and jocose tendencies, prone to impede the action of the piece.

Meanwhile, Lufra, a young gipsy beauty, easily recognised by the habitual playgoer as Miss Mountcharles, had stolen forward to listen, expressing, with hands, shoulders, and eyebrows, how strong an impression was made on her innocence by the appearance and manners of these visitors.

Their dress, indeed, seemed sufficiently startling. The Hospodar wore a long tunic, reaching to his knees, trimmed with fur, gold lace on his trousers, and, as a convenient appendage for a gentleman travelling through Europe in his own carriage, an enormous pair of brass heel-spurs. The secretary, whose

proper title appeared to be Count Randolph, was clad in tights and hessian boots, with a white hat and a closely-buttoned brown frock-coat, on the breast of which glittered an enormous tinsel star. Fritz, whose military costume has already been mentioned, flapped about with a sabretache, but no sword!

Presently, as the action progresses, certain situations arise, of considerable dramatic power, and there is some good acting, notably on the part of Miss Mountcharles, who shades off, with nice delicacy of touch, the imperceptible gradations by which a young girl's interest grows to sympathy, admiration, and love. The Hospodar, captivated from the first by Lufra's swarthy charms, advances, with marvellous rapidity, in her good graces (for the carriages are ordered at eleven), and obtains, in a few minutes, a confession of attachment, delivered frankly enough while she looks over his shoulder in Count Randolph's face. These

are fine times for Mr. Delapré, who rants and rolls his eyes in paroxysms of very excusable jealousy, Lufra being the betrothed of Gipsy John, and, taking his cue from a great star in Othello, indulges himself with much posture-making, contortion, and gnashing of teeth, writhing, gesticulating, and, in the language provided by the talented author—

Gnawing his heart, as wild dogs mouth a bone.

It is quite in accordance with reality that little privacy should be found in a gipsy camp, so they all overhear each other if anything of importance is to be communicated, thus helping on the piece, as, when deeds of violence are contemplated, everybody is at hand, and endless opportunities are afforded the comic servant of interposing to prevent bloodshed, with a facetious insolence that might be dangerous, if Hospodars were an irritable race.

However, there is some pleasant love-

making by moonlight, and Miss Mountcharles—perhaps not inexperienced in this line—acquits herself with so much spirit as to draw down a handsome bouquet, thrown from a private box. It destroys the illusion, that the gipsy should leave her forest-glades, come to the footlights, and curtsy, pressing the flowers to her heart. But what would you have? These compliments must be acknowledged; and though a shy young man, who discharged the missile, shrinks back and draws his curtain, Miss Mountcharles knows whence it comes, no doubt, and is grateful.

Recalled to a sense of her situation—as promised wife of a gipsy, and beloved of a Hospodar—she expresses contrition by word and action, but allows herself, none the less, to be inveigled into a carriage standing in the background; when Gipsy John rushing from the wings to oppose her elopement, a pistol is fired off by the Hospodar, and a general row

ensues, bringing down the drop-scene on a well-arranged *tableau* of flashing knives, brandished staves, and gesticulating gipsies, whose chief, but slightly wounded, points, with extended arm, to Lufra senseless in the midst, supported by Count Randolph and the Hospodar.

This drop-scene, too, is justly admired. It displays a tribe of gipsies on the march, apparently through the Pyrenees, with mules, donkeys, and a shaggy pony, the principal figures calling to mind certain well-known representations, by old masters, of the Flight into Egypt.

And now people begin to talk and stretch themselves. The ladies make good use of their fans and converse with their admirers, while these yawn, stand up, and turn round to survey the house.

Lord St. Moritz, who has been unusually attentive to the business of the stage, finds

time to look about him. Suddenly he starts, and scarcely represses an exclamation of surprise unnoticed by Mrs. Stripwell, who, vouchsafing a few civilities to Prance, is wondering in which of those private boxes "poor Algy" has ensconced himself, justly persuaded that he is sure to follow her here for the empty gratification of being under the same roof. His lordship has a quick eye and not a bad memory, nor is it possible to mistake the turn of that graceful head, those coils of gleaming black hair. All his old feelings come back with a rush, and he would make any sacrifice only to take Beltenebrosa by the hand once more. But he must bide his time. Mr. Delapré, a judicious caterer for the public, allows no long intervals of waiting, and already a bell is ringing to announce the continuation of the piece.

END OF VOL. II.

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